

JAMES GRIFFITH

A Walk through History: Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato*

. . . to an incredible degree in Vietnam I think we were
haunted and indeed imprisoned by the past.

—David Halberstam (Knightley 423)

IN TIM O'BRIEN'S

Going After Cacciato, Paul Berlin's surname would (or used to) suggest that he is a soldier divided against himself. His immediate circumstance finds him on watch duty atop an observation post at Quang Ngai, Vietnam, from midnight to six a.m. in late November 1968. It is "a bad time" (1), for several of his comrades have been lost. Unmentioned is the frightful history of the year: the Tet offensive and siege at Khe Sanh, the massacre at My Lai, the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy, the riots in Chicago during the Democratic convention, and, finally, the prospect of peace talks in Paris—with the shape of the table first on the agenda. Bad time, indeed. Nevertheless, these particular facts of history do not explicitly occupy Paul's mind.

In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, a memoir of his participation in the history of that time, O'Brien writes that he was persuaded that "the war was wrong" (26). Even so, when he was drafted in the summer of 1968, doubts about his ability to understand the issues, and feelings of duty to

family and country, prevented him from going to Sweden by way of Canada: "I simply couldn't bring myself to flee. Family, the hometown, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile: I could not run" (73). Although O'Brien served his tour of duty in 1969, he places Paul in Vietnam a year earlier—a time of several important tides' turnings, whether Paul thinks about them or not. The personal issue of moral courage remains, though, and the novel thereby becomes what O'Brien has called a fictional "flip side" (McCaffery 133) of the memoir in which he can imagine the consequences of running. The novel, however, does more than revise personal history: it confronts and struggles with history, personal and national.¹

As Dennis Vannatta has correctly observed, the novel has three kinds of chapters (243). First are those chapters marking Paul's hours on the observation post where he tries to think through his fears and doubts and recollect the order of terrible experiences since arriving in Vietnam. Second, in no particular order, are his flashbacks, some of home and youth, but mostly of terrible experiences of fear and death in six months of combat, including the deliberately indirect memory of his complicity in the platoon's fragging of Lt. Martin because of Martin's insistence upon searching tunnels. Last are the fantastic chapters in which Paul imagines a mission to pursue and capture Cacciato, the rather simple-minded soldier who, profoundly disillusioned by Martin's murder, has left the war to walk to Paris. (Even in this fictional world, then, Paul contemplates running only as a fanciful possibility; moreover, feeling the same doubts O'Brien mentions in his *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, Paul cannot even imagine desertion without the excuse of pursuing a real deserter, Cacciato.) This fantastic journey raises the questions I wish to address: Why Paris? For such a desperate plan, would not Hong Kong or even Rome be closer?² What purpose do the several characters met along

the way serve? And why does Paul encounter certain kinds of events?

In broad terms, Eric James Schroeder has described the journey as more than an escape: when Paul plays solitaire and pretends he is winning in Las Vegas, “This type of ‘pretending’ is simply escapism. . .”; but when he imagines the journey, his “‘working out of the possibilities’ represents a mode of not only coping with the war’s reality (paradoxically, through the illusion of escaping it) but also of coming to terms with his identity as a soldier” (“The Past” 127). Thomas Myers notes that, even if Paul did wish for escape in the imaginative journey, the “pursuit of Cacciato is filled with the same hazards, personal fears, and moral quandaries offered by the reality experienced in unfiltered Vietnam daylight” (175). Instead of a replay of actual conflict, Edward Palm finds a contemporary morality play in the journey: Cacciato’s “nondescript quality” represents the idea that

the idealistic concepts of honor, courage, and patriotism we traditionally pursue in time of war are vague and without substance. Seen in this light, the pursuit of Cacciato becomes an ironic allegory for the Vietnam War itself with yet another character, a young Vietnamese girl named Sarkin Aung Wan, serving as foil to Cacciato and representing the tempting expedient of simply abandoning a futile and pointless quest. (123-24)

Each of these views suggests points worth pursuing, but none specifically addresses the questions raised above about the particular characters and events. The answers lie in seeing that, as Schroeder writes, the journey turns into more

than a wishful escape: to be precise, Paul tries to imagine a walk to Paris, but the implied author directs his route through history, a six-hour fantasy that blends six months of Paul's history with the country's; if not the literal allegory that Palm claims, the fantasy certainly places mimetic details of Paul's life in a much larger context of political issues. That is, the itinerary and events force Paul to relive some of his recent, chaotic past—as Myers suggests—and, unconsciously, to retrace some of the war's history. Along the way, Paul confronts the difficulty of making sense of his role in the war's moral and political confusion, for he has no settled ideas about the conflict. An implied author, on the other hand, "will never be neutral toward all values. Our reactions to his various commitments, secret or overt, will help to determine our response to the work" (Booth 71). In this instance, the implied author, quite aware of the contesting parties' histories and the war's outcome, hopes to show how this war cruelly forced soldiers personally to face terrible issues—with sometimes heroic and sometimes ignoble results—for politically vain reasons.

The sense of history holds much importance in the novel. Along the road to Paris, Paul's squad spends a night in Ovissil, Afghanistan. The town's mayor, their host, is a "history-teller" (whose stance resembles the implied author's over Paul's story): "Fortune telling is for lunatics and old women. History is the stronger science, for it has the virtue of certainty without the vice of blasphemy" (179). He then tells Lt. Corson's history but refuses to tell Paul's: "You are young. . . . I cannot tell unmade histories" (179). Paul feels slighted, insisting he has a history, and the ensuing chapter recounts—in fewer than two pages—his life up to the age of twenty when he was drafted.

Although Paul does not realize it, his first two decades were the easy part. His last six months present the

difficulties and hardly reflect any “virtue of certainty”: “Keeping track wasn’t easy. The order of things—chronologies—that was the hard part” (49). This confusion will never disappear for Paul or for the reader. Careful attention allows us to put many events in order, but we cannot resolve the contradictory facts that Pederson is present when Bernie Lynn dies in Chapter 14 and that Bernie Lynn is present when Pederson dies in Chapter 20. (In addition to questions brought on by Paul’s confused memory, we might also ask how his imagination, in November 1968, could accurately predict that Dwight Eisenhower would die about the time the squad arrives in Paris on April Fools’ Day 1969.) Nevertheless, the imaginary trek gives Paul the opportunity to review and, at least, attempt to comprehend his recent past.

Fear dominates that recent past, and Paul feels ashamed of his lack of courage. In fact, he knows he could have killed a comrade in panic, actually firing the rounds himself—quite a different matter from his passive complicity with the squad’s murder of Lt. Martin. The mission to capture Cacciato ends on a hill where the squad thinks they have Cacciato surrounded. As they charge, Paul begins firing uncontrollably, even setting the grass on fire. Fortunately, Cacciato has decamped, for otherwise he would certainly have been caught in the fusillade of Paul’s automatic weapon. Soon thereafter, in Paul’s imagined continuation of the mission, Stink’s capture of some refugees imaginatively revises the act. Stink shoots suddenly, without warning, “without aiming,” on automatic fire—“It was Quick Kill. Point blank, rifle jerking” (52)—and slaughters two water buffalo while miraculously missing the three women on the cart.³ Stink boasts of his quick reactions, but the others call him stupid, much as they were disgusted with Paul on the hill. At the end of the imaginary mission, however, Paul cannot displace the responsibility onto Stink, nor displace

his panic with something like Stink's bravado: when the squad bursts into Cacciato's Paris apartment, Paul shoots up the room uncontrollably. Paul realizes that the room, like the hill, "was empty" (332), but he knows that he could not have stopped his panicky firing in any case.⁴ Paul calls the charge up the hill the "last known fact" (325), but in his imagination, the fear that ensues is the first and lasting fact—a fear that can cause one to turn on innocents and comrades.

Of course the war has much that anyone would reasonably fear. For instance, the elaborate system of tunnels led soldiers to believe that the enemy could pop up and just as suddenly disappear anywhere. Also, for a platoon under the command of a Lt. Martin, finding a tunnel entrance requires, according to Standard Operating Procedure, dispatching one man into the tight, dark hole to search it. On the fantastic journey, when "a hole in the road to Paris" spills the squad into an international network of tunnels, the lone Vietcong, Li Van Hgoc (a Southeast Asian "Leewen' nek?"), pushes Paul to look through a periscope, forcing him to examine that particular fear out of the recent past. Through the mouth of a tunnel, Paul watches a replay of two comrades' deaths, those of Frenchie and Bernie Lynn: having been threatened with court martial, Frenchie has crawled into the tunnel and been shot; when no one volunteers to go in after him (although Cacciato is willing), Bernie Lynn swears, drops his gear, and goes in where "his feet were still showing when he was shot" (90). Paul also sees himself standing aside, "careful not to look at anyone" (90) when Lt. Martin is asking for volunteers. As Li Van Hgoc tells him, "From down below, or from inside out, you often discover entirely new understandings" (91).

By force of imagination, Paul manages to escape this tunnel with his remaining comrades, but reminders of fear and death persist along the road to Paris. In Tehran, they

witness the beheading of an Iranian soldier who had gone AWOL. Besides reminding Paul that running is a crime, the execution also recalls a kind of shame and futility surrounding death in combat. Buff, another comrade killed in action, is found dead in the “unpretty” position of kneeling face-down: “. . . all hunched up on his knees, ass stickin’ up in the air. . . . like the way Arabs pray. . .” (282). After a helicopter removes Buff’s body, the rest of the platoon notices his face has been left in the helmet. Doc says it is “not decent. . . . not respectable” (286-87) to leave Buff’s face that way, and Cacciato casually disposes of it in some tall grass, “like a woman emptying her wash basin—” (287). The Iranian soldier, kneeling face-down before the chopping block, as Paul observes, shows no emotion until a fly settles on his face: “It was not fear. It was shame. . . . The boy’s tongue was still groping toward his nose when the axe fell” (189). The fear of death grips deeply enough, but the cruel feelings of ridiculous futility, embarrassment—the literal loss of face—linger for those whom death spares.

The squad’s escape from Tehran—they have been arrested for desertion—recalls another fearful sensation Paul would have felt in combat: the feeling of chaos. Cacciato springs them from *Savak*’s jail and sends them off in a Chevy Impala, but they soon find themselves surrounded in a traffic circle:

The sounds of the rifle fire were lost in the deeper sounds of artillery, but the soldiers were firing, and red tracers made pretty darts in the wind. The car bucked. There was the sudden smell of burning metal, then tearing sounds. The red darts made holes in the door. A window crashed open and the wind sucked in.

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. . . Stink's door had come open. He was weeping, hanging on to the elbow rest, but spinning forces kept the door open, dragging Stink out. He screamed and clawed at the door. . . . Paul Berlin tried to get his eyes to close. (246-47)

Details of this chaotic ambush—the sounds of gunfire and the wind, the holes shot through metal, the burning smell, the inability of one soldier to maintain his balance, and the inability of another to watch—come directly from memory of the hot landing where Pederson was eventually cut down by the indiscriminate “friendly fire” of the helicopter’s door gunners:

Then there were new sounds. Like dog whistles, high pitched and sharp. . . . Holes opened in the hull, then more holes, and the wind sucked through the holes, and Vaught was shouting. A long tear opened in the floor, then a corresponding tear in the ceiling above, and the wind howled in all around.

. . . There was a burning smell—metal and hot machinery and the gunners’ guns. Harold Murphy was still on the floor, smiling and shaking his head and trying to get up, but he couldn’t do it. He’d get to his knees and press, and almost make it, but not quite, and he’d fall and shake his head and smile and try again. Pederson’s eyes were closed. He held his stomach and sat still. He was the only one still sitting. (129-30)

This bedlam in combat brings about the death of Pederson. In the imaginary replay of the scene as they

escape from Tehran, no casualties from “friendly fire” occur, but Paul’s mind quickly turns to another self-inflicted defeat, the fragging of Lt. Martin: “The way events led to events, and the way they got out of human control” (248). Paul does not want to fight in Vietnam, and Cacciato does not want to kill Lt. Martin, but both are “pressed” into service: the draft brings Paul to Vietnam, and, as one event uncontrollably leads to another, he presses Cacciato’s hand onto the grenade that the squad has touched to signify their votes for Lt. Martin’s murder.

Paul thinks now that “Cacciato was dumb, but he was right” (249). Thus, even if Paul cannot simply walk away from the war, he cannot completely dismiss this response in anyone else. In Paris, the men never actually lay hands on Cacciato, and even before their final attempt to capture him, Lt. Corson and Sarkin, the refugee whom Paul loves, disappear as well: “Heading east. A long walk but we’ll make it” (327). Out of Paul’s recent, chaotic history, then, the imaginary trek leads to difficult resolutions: the first and last fact is fear, and the first and last escape is walking away—unless he can face that dominating fear.

These imagined events sort out and rehearse Paul’s recent past the way dreams may refashion events and feelings from waking life: some leave tremendously awful impressions—such as the hot landing that ends with Pederson’s death—or strangely minor ones—such as Cacciato’s getting “bites” while fishing in rain-filled craters, a detail that transforms into Stink’s getting bitten by Cacciato on the road to Paris (that is, a bite from something that is not there). Thus, to the extent so far discussed, the daydream’s fearsome events, as those in a nightmare, have no more motivation than the emotion of fear and the reaction of flight. On another level, however, above the concerns of the character, the implied author uses Paul’s imaginative escape to dramatize some of the larger historical issues about which Paul is ignorant.

Paul seems, as mentioned earlier, unaware of the extraordinary turmoil that marked 1968. With no knowledge of current events, he certainly will have little understanding of their historical context, a circumstance that, Myers states, raises the difficult question of “how to act properly within a configuration that affords the entrapped soldier little historical understanding or moral justification as he experiences the most jarring imagery of waste and death” (171). James C. Wilson emphasizes that *Going After Cacciato* succeeds because, like so few other novels set in Vietnam, it perceptively “explores the problem that arises from the absence of historical perspective” (56). The chapter “The Things They Didn’t Know” neatly summarizes this ignorance:

Not knowing the language, they did not know the people. They did not know what the people loved or respected or feared or hated. (263)

. . . [Paul] didn’t know who was right, or what was right; he didn’t know if it was a war of self-determination or self-destruction, outright aggression or national liberation; he didn’t know which speeches to believe, which books, which politicians; he didn’t know if nations would topple like dominoes or stand separate like trees; he didn’t know who really started the war, or why, or when, or with what motives; he didn’t know if it mattered; he saw sense in both sides of the debate, but he didn’t know where truth lay; he didn’t know if Communist tyranny would prove worse in the long run than the tyrannies of Ky or Thieu or Khanh—he simply didn’t know. (266)

. . . They did not know even the simple things: a sense of victory, or satisfaction, or necessary sacrifice. They did not know the feeling of taking a place and keeping it, securing a village and then raising the flag and calling it a victory. . . . They did not know how to feel when they saw villages burning. Revenge? Loss? Peace of mind or anguish? . . . They did not know good from evil. (272-73)

The imaginary walk to Paris does not resolve such doubts for Paul, but in the arrangement of incidents that refer to larger historical issues, we can perceive the shape of O'Brien's belief.

The simple act of crossing the border out of Vietnam should recall the expansion of the war into Laos and Cambodia—incursions that were more common than the public realized until Nixon made the operations public in 1970. The squad's mission is to pursue Cacciato who is seeking respite from the war by fleeing Vietnam; the American military's tactics were to pursue Vietcong who sought sanctuary in neighboring countries. If the objects of pursuit differ, the national strategy and the squad's mission yield similar results. The squad's mission is doubly fruitless: Cacciato always eludes them, and inasmuch as Paul wishes to escape the war, his imaginative journey keeps returning him to the war, its sensations and its issues. Crossing borders solves no problems; in fact, it leads to confronting them instead, for Paul, unlike Cacciato, cannot simply walk away from the war.

For the US, the incursions into Laos and Cambodia were fruitless and even destructive. In Laos, proxy bombing raids in the early 1960s and then actual US bombing, in a decade's time, forced over 140,000 people off the Plain of

Jars and onto the road as refugees (Isaacs 160-62). Another proxy incursion by Army of the Republic of Vietnam (ARVN) troops to cut the Ho Chi Minh trail within Laos resulted in disaster when the troops were drawn in, surrounded, and then cut up despite heavy American air support; the ARVN suffered a 50% casualty rate, and supply traffic along the trail returned, not only to normal, but reached even higher than previous volumes within three months (Fitzgerald 553-55). All along, the diplomatic struggles of Souvanna Phouma, favoring the North Vietnamese and later turning a deaf ear to the bombing of their supply routes in his country, came to naught when, upon the US's general withdrawal from southeast Asia, Phouma had to negotiate for a coalition government that the Pathet Lao quickly abandoned and overran (Isaacs 173-81).

Similarly, the more infamous invasion of Cambodia yielded no real benefits. US troops destroyed plenty of materiel but inflicted relatively few casualties, thereby delaying the "North Vietnamese offensive by no more than a year" (Fitzgerald 553). Prince Norodom Sihanouk, like Souvanna Phouma, allowed the bombing of enemy supply lines without complaint, and his political life fared as well as his neighbor's in Laos. Faced with contending ideas on how to handle the challenge of the indigenous Khmer Rouge, Sihanouk's government was overthrown by Lon Nol; Lon Nol first adamantly condemned all foreign intervention in Cambodia but soon asked for help—which came in the form of the US incursion that the Nixon administration had planned already (Karnow 604-6). Of course, when the secrecy of Nixon's Cambodian moves was revealed, the backlash at home was politically costly and even incendiary at Kent State where four students died during protests on campus. As for Cambodia, in the intervening years 1970 to 1975, Lon Nol's government relied on the support of the US, and the American

withdrawal from Southeast Asia left Cambodia powerless to repulse Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge and the coming of what we know as the "killing fields" (Karnow 44-45). For Paul Berlin's squad's military mission and America's military policy, then, crossing borders solves nothing and even creates additional problems; what begins as pursuit of Cacciato becomes a running from the original conflict. The fictional squad's motives may be understandable, but the larger US policy shows blundering and shame.

Once into Laos, Berlin's squad encounters the refugee problem, personified in Sarkin Aung Wan. Paul has always considered the native population with sadness and regret: "He wanted to be liked. He wanted them to understand, all of them, that he felt no hate. It was all a sad accident, he would have told them—chance, high-level politics, confusion" (265). He cannot explain himself because he cannot speak their language. With Sarkin, though, Paul can talk and even fall in love. Their different problems keep them separate, however. Sarkin needs to find peace by any means to survive; Paul needs to find peace in the means by which he survives. As he would confess to the people, he is "guilty perhaps of hanging on, of letting myself be dragged along, of falling victim to gravity and obligation and events, but not—not!—guilty of wrong intentions" (266). In the end, Paul has almost nothing to offer Sarkin that can help. Long before Paul arrived in Vietnam, the policy of the Diem government was to move the villagers out of hamlets and into refugee camps, and American strategy "completed the process the Diem regime had begun" (Fitzgerald 574). Michael Huynh, of the Southeast Asia Resettlement Program, underscores the final impact of uprooting so many:

. . . more than a million people were forced out of Vietnam at the end of the war. . . . Even during the famine of 1945, when more than two million people died from lack of food, we did not leave our country. The results of this war displaced a whole population. (218)

Paul loves Sarkin and wants to save her, but the common soldier's lot is to be frustrated in such humane desires. Not surprisingly, therefore, out of their "peace talks" in Paris, "there is no true negotiation" (323).

Of course, even if Paul could speak to the people, many may not care to listen, for the issues escape him as surely as Cacciato does. Paul knows how he feels but cannot understand how the Vietnamese feel: how and why they suffer. Paul assumes that only the war's killing and destruction oppress the people. This assumption proves to be naive once Paul spots Cacciato among a crowd of monks in Mandalay. Paul wades into the crowd, apparently believing that an American soldier can count on the passivity of monks everywhere. But these monks administer quite a thrashing to Paul, for as Sarkin explains, he is "disturbing Cao Dai. Disrupting evening prayers. Touching the untouchables" (122). Paul's blunder ought to remind the reader of American ignorance concerning the religious issues in Vietnam: early on, the US was supporting Diem, a Catholic who was suppressing Buddhism. Frances Fitzgerald points out that reporters who discussed protests in terms of religious versus political motivations "were so entrenched in their Western notion of the division of church and state that they could not imagine the Vietnamese might not make the distinction" (18). In addition, the Vietnamese monks hardly behaved with total passivity: during protests, they carried signs in English, which they did not speak or

understand, and they quickly “came to know which TV crews to phone when a self-immolation was scheduled, and how much time to give them to get to the appointed place and set up their cameras” (Hilsman 125). These visual records of monks burning themselves in protest against Diem dealt American viewers a severe shock, and the naivete of the reporting only added to the bewilderment.

These political martyrs were Buddhist whereas Paul confronts Cao Dai monks. Aside from general religious issues, this reference to a specific sect carries other implications. The Cao Dai show western influence insofar as their worship is eclectic: they revere Jesus and Buddha, but also “saints” such as Joan of Arc, Victor Hugo, and Sun Yat-sen (Karnow 143). Their political loyalties would have baffled Paul all the more had he known the Cao Dai’s history. In the late fifties, the US ambassador forestalled a possible overthrow of Diem by bribing, along with other leaders, influential members of the Cao Dai; Diem survived, but thousands of the Cao Dai soon joined the opposition that would become the Vietcong (Karnow 222-23). Of further interest, in terms of problems O’Brien considers, the Cao Dai, in the early fifties, attracted many youths who joined in order to avoid a military draft (Patti 411). Paul Berlin cannot realize that he takes a beating from people who might share his feelings of resistance—without the confusion—regarding the war.

Paul, like most Americans, knows little about such historic forces in Vietnam and, further, knows just as little about the historic force he represents himself. Whatever the morality of American policy, the presence of such a large military commitment meant dislocation for the Vietnamese culture anyway. The causing of destruction and the meddling in foreign affairs aside, America’s presence in Vietnam precipitated changes that appear less obvious. In the novel, Paul Berlin confronts these changes in the person

of Hamijolli Chand (whose name means “jolly moon,” which recalls the characterization of the happy, moon-faced Cacciato). In Delhi, she houses the squad in her hotel and clearly enjoys their company. Jolly Chand, as the Americans call her, tells of how she once lived in America and fell in love with its shopping malls, televisions, and other temptations: “‘Corrupted,’ she said brightly. ‘That’s what my husband contends—corrupted by hamburgers and french fries and Winston One Hundreds’” (148). As if the materialistic desires were not condemning enough, Jolly has a taste for beef and, soon, a taste for Lt. Corson—appetites in a country that reveres sacred cows and supports the tradition of purdah, the practice of keeping women secluded from men not their husbands.

Just so, entering Vietnam involved more than a military presence; the American presence represented a cultural invasion whose soldiers brought their language, their music, their food, and much other “artillery” in the war to make a home away from home. The US, however, was not alone in initiating such corrupting influence. Archimedes L. A. Patti quotes a French report criticizing the High Commissioner for turning Saigon into a place “where gambling, depravity, love of money and of power finish by corrupting the morale and destroying will-power. . .” (414). Frances Fitzgerald states, however, that the French occupation and war at least left the family intact, but with the American war came a complete cultural death: “‘That is, above all, what the Vietnamese blame the Americans for,’ said one Vietnamese scholar. ‘Willfully or not, they have tended to destroy what is most precious to us: family, friendship, our manner of expressing ourselves’” (572); in addition, those peasants who moved into the cities and became “used to the luxuries of the West and the freedoms” were all the more destitute when the Americans left (579). Don Luce describes the cultural collision bluntly, noting that South Vietnam

suffered more than the North, for it was “faced not only with the physical problems of rebuilding but also with the problems of readjustment for most of its citizens.” On the one hand, “‘Country Fairs’ brought rock-and-roll music, hot dogs, and Kool-Aid to remote villages. . . .” On the other hand, those Vietnamese who fled to the cities, farm boys turned to crime for survival, “became addicted to the drugs they were pushing” and forgot all about the necessary occupation of farming; and the young women also fell out of the true work force, for after “working in the bars and brothels. . . . two-thirds of these women had venereal disease, and many were addicted to hard drugs” (273-74). Jolly Chand claims to be happy with her western outlook, but such an outlook puts her at odds with life in Asia. The confrontation must be harsher for the actual populace of Southeast Asia for whom the cultural clash was unwelcomed and unexpected.

These matters of religion and culture have to do only with the “friendly” population. Meeting the enemy raises an even more immediate issue: the strategy and tactics of the war. The interlude with Li Van Hgoc forces Paul Berlin to relive the incident when two comrades die in the tunnels, but that fanciful meeting also exhibits the fundamental level of battle. When the squad asks Li for directions out of the tunnel, he is almost embarrassed to inform them, “. . . according to the rules, I fear you gentlemen are now my prisoners” (92). Li’s arresting statement points out how all soldiers, captured or not, suffer as prisoners in this kind of seemingly fruitless war. The squad has no time for this philosophizing, though, and is in fact incredulous:

“Outmanned, outgunned, and outtechnologized.” Lieutenant Corson tapped his finger against the weapon’s plastic stock.

“Well spoken,” the enemy said. “A neat summary of the issues. Very well spoken.” (93)

In response, the Americans point their guns at the unarmed Li, tie him up, and set out to find their own escape from the tunnels—to find the proverbial light at the end of the tunnel, and to accept a simple “exit” sign as light enough. Now, Li is incredulous: “Violence will not—. . . Please! The puzzle, it cannot be solved this way” (94). The Americans get away, but Li has a point.

Earlier, Li told the squad that they are fighting the land: the traps, the tunnels, and the paddies all present danger because the land is fighting back. He describes the force as *Xa*, meaning “that a man’s spirit is in the land, where his ancestors rest and where the rice grows” (86). According to Fitzgerald, the term also conveys the sense that a Vietnamese is connected to the land in such a way that it embodies one’s “face” or personality. Hence, the ease with which the Vietnamese could blend into the landscape. On the surface, American soldiers saw primitive villages, but beneath them were networks of tunnels holding not-so-primitive supplies. The enemy’s retreats were thereby “doubly invisible: invisible within the ground and then again invisible within their own perspective as Americans” (192-93). North Vietnam’s General Giap promulgated this guideline of evasion: “Concerning tactics, practice guerilla methods: secrecy, speed, initiative (today in the East, tomorrow in the West); appear and disappear by surprise, without leaving a trace. . .” (Burchett 47). Analysts on both sides retrospectively agreed that American firepower and manpower reflected strategy appropriate to some earlier combat: the Americans were big, burdened by equipment, and therefore clumsy and slow to adapt (Maclear 162-63). Ho Chi Minh described his revolution, before the Americans

arrived, as “grasshoppers that dare stand up to the elephants.” He showed some prescience about American involvement when he added, “Tomorrow, it’s the elephant that leaves its skin behind” (Burchett 15). Paul Berlin’s squad, too, fails to understand from Li’s pleading that having more troops, more guns, and more technology will not avail in Vietnam; anyone who comes into the country thinking otherwise condemns himself to being a prisoner of that war and that strategy.

Such war by attrition displays an ignorance of the enemy and the issues—the kind of ignorance that leads the promotion board to push Paul into answering that the reason for fighting the war is only “To win it” and that the death of Ho Chi Minh will affect the North Vietnamese population only to the extent that it will “Reduce it by one, sir” (271). The enemy does not foist this problem on Paul Berlin’s squad, nor does the problem come from the location or circumstances of the war. The problem comes from within, and within himself is where Paul has his toughest confrontations.

Paul plays out his confusion about the tactics and the overall mission of the war in the dialogue between Doc and Fahyi Rhallon, the obsequiously polite security officer the Americans meet in Tehran. Over drinks, Doc states that the war is like any other war:

“Politics be damned. Sociology be damned. It pisses me off to hear everybody say how special Nam is. . . . I’m saying that the *feel* of war is the same in Nam or Okinawa—the emotions are the same, the same fundamental stuff is seen and remembered.” (198)

In terms of horror and fear, Paul’s experience would tend

to fit Doc's analysis; however, in terms of purpose and motivation, Rhallon's position speaks for Paul as well:

“. . . but I understand that one difficulty for you has been a lack of purpose. . . . An absence of aim and purpose, so that the foot soldier is left without the moral imperatives to fight hard and well and winningly.” (198)

Like the meeting in Paris between Sarkin and Paul, this exchange produces statements of position without any true negotiation. When the conversation turns to desertion—a sensitive subject for Paul and the others—Rhallon repeats that purpose keeps men from running: “Without purpose men will run. They will act their dreams, and they will run and run, like animals in stampede” (200). Doc replies, “Maybe purpose is part of it. But a bigger part is self-respect. And fear” (200). This “debate” exposes Paul's inner divisions, reflecting his imagined actions so far and anticipating his imagined resolution to come. As always, the issue boils down to fear: fear of facing death or fear of facing a cowardly self.

In pursuit of Cacciato, Paul imagines that others would question the squad's motives. Paul subconsciously enacts these questions by having the squad, before they can vindicate their actions by capturing the deserter, run into other deserters. Li Van Hgoc resisted the war and deserted, for which he is sentenced to the tunnels; in Tehran, just before meeting Rhallon, the squad sees a young man beheaded for, they later learn, being AWOL—“For true deserters the punishment is not so kind” (202). Paul wrestles with this question in his mind, but he is hardly alone in actuality. Until 1968, military absenteeism remained below rates for World War II and Korea. Then, in the next three years, the rate doubled twice:

These desertions were both in Vietnam and at US bases world-wide indicating the wider military demoralization. . . . The combined desertion and AWOL numbers meant that about one in four of the US forces had mutinied or ere defying military orders. . . . (Maclear 280)

One British draft counselor claims that in one of the war's peak years, "seventy-three thousand soldiers deserted—the equivalent of three full combat divisions with supply units" (Sigal 67). These deserters certainly had numerous motivations, but in many cases, the war's lack of clear or moral purpose may have given running from it an apparent sense of purpose. Michael Novak, with a group that interviewed several dozen deserters in Paris and Stockholm, reports that, like Paul, these former soldiers arrived at such a sense only after being in the war:

Although in the small towns from which most of them come they had no tradition for examining and questioning American political life, and particularly American foreign policy, they were acute enough to see through the Army and its propaganda. . . . Their resistance to the war grew out of their own guts, in confrontation with the army. . . . To accept induction was the easy, natural path of the conformity and docility it is the business of American grammar schools and high schools to teach them: not critical, not questioning. Almost all of those who spoke to me were not pacifists; they were not absolutely against war, or the army; except for the peculiar nature of the Vietnamese war, a war on the poor, on civilians, in support of a vastly unpopular

Saigon government, they would still be in the army, getting their term of duty over with. (277)

In short, the announced purpose of the war could not bear scrutiny, especially under fire, and another purpose—survival, obviously, or honor—filled the void.

Cacciato, for one, has more than survival as a reason for running. Pressed into cooperating with Lt. Martin's assassination, he must feel the war has no identifiably moral goal anymore. Cacciato displays great sensitivity, but again, the history of the war shows he was not alone in encountering the issue:

The term fragging derived from the use of a fragmentation weapon, usually a hand-grenade, as the surest way of dispatching an unpopular officer. . . . Prior to 1969 "fragging" was apparently so rare that official statistics do not record any incidents. Between 1969 and 1971 assaults on officers in Vietnam averaged 240 a year, eleven percent fatal. (Maclear 271, 280)

In other words, doubts about the war effort spread through much of the military, even if soldiers such as Paul agonized over them seemingly alone. In the novel, Paul's squad encounters the revolutionary woman from California outside Zagreb. Wearing her politics like a latest fashion, she presumes that the American squad's courage resides in the ability to witness "evil firsthand" and walk away in guilt (277). But her views show no more sophistication than those of Paul's promotion board. At the time of the novel's events, antiwar sentiments held sway because the media's coverage of the Tet offensive showed what many Americans viewed as enemy resilience:

The pictures of corpses in the garden of the American embassy cut through the haze of argument and counterargument, giving flat contradiction to the official optimism about the slow but steady progress of the war. Those who had long held doubts and reservations now felt their doubts confirmed. (Fitzgerald 526)⁵

In any case, the revolutionary woman from California still represents division, and division represents most of the doubts examined in the novel. Paul Berlin is a soldier divided against himself, fighting in a force divided against itself, on behalf of a country divided against itself, over another country divided against itself.

The revolutionary from California can argue these issues in a flip manner, but for Berlin's squad, the issues involve life or death—which to Paul's frightened mind means death. Paul imaginatively mulls over this feared inevitability in the scene wherein he witnesses the beheading in Tehran. Myers calls the incident "a grisly symbol of the true inertia on the road to Paris" (181), but the symbolism should bring more specific ideas to mind. The execution, for being AWOL, includes a ceremony that recalls the beginning rather than the end of military involvement. The platform has patriotic decorations, martial music plays over loudspeakers, and several officers attend in full dress uniforms; before the ax falls, the young man's neck is shaved, his cheeks are kissed by the officers, and speeches are made. In sum, the whole spectacle parodies a ceremony to send new draftees to the front: first comes a haircut, then comes the final cut.

The history of the home front, of course, included plenty of anti-draft agitation. For the protest movement, tactics to avoid the draft included deferments, exile, conscientious objection, and sometimes jail. Until 1969, when deferments

were abolished, the result, according to Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., was that “the war in Vietnam was being fought in the main by the sons of poor whites and blacks whose parents did not have much influence in the community” (qtd. in Maclear 232). For Paul, the choice is academic and, to his way of thinking, cruelly rigged against him: running may be a capital offense in the military, but simply being drafted is tantamount to kneeling before the chopping block anyway.

Accordingly, Paul runs, but only in his imagination, and his hoped-for destination is clarity of mind. The trek leads to Paris because Cacciato said he was going there, but the city suggests a historical destination also. As Sarkin says in leading the squad out of Li’s tunnels, “The way in is the way out” (98). Paul knows almost nothing about Vietnam, so he does not know that the way into the modern history of the war in Vietnam leads through Paris. As early as 1856, Napoleon III proceeded with plans to take Vietnamese territory as retribution for Vietnamese abuse of French missionaries; in 1887, despite violent resistance, the fall of Napoleon III, and internal debate, France consolidated all of present-day Vietnam and Cambodia into the Indochinese Union, a “pacified” colony (Karnow 72-88). The area remained in French hands, with a brief Japanese interruption during World War II, until the siege at Dien Bien Phu in 1954 when the French command “woefully miscalculated [Vietnamese General] Giap’s intentions and capabilities even before the shooting started,” largely because they “had wrongly disregarded intelligence that did not fit their prejudices, and instead ‘substituted their preconceived idea of the Vietminh for the facts’” (Karnow 194). If Paul remains ignorant of this preview of American involvement in Vietnam, he must know of the contemporary role Paris was playing in the war as the site for the peace talks. Those talks, which began just one month before Paul came to

Vietnam, took “seven months just to resolve the seating arrangements (so that the Saigon and N[ational] L[iberation] F[ront] delegations could avoid face-to-face recognition and discussion)” (Maclear 248); in fact, according to Michael Novak, the NLF even suspected their North Vietnamese allies would sell them out and negotiate in ways that “would benefit the North at the expense of the South” (276). In any event, the United States certainly did not prevail at the table, despite the table’s shape or its seating arrangements. The 1973 treaty the U. S. signed allowed 150,000 North Vietnamese troops to remain in the South while US troops withdrew. One of our negotiators, John Negroponte, stated,

We got our prisoners back; we were able to end our direct military involvement. But there were no ostensible benefits for Saigon to justify all of the enormous effort and bloodshed of the previous years. (qtd. in Maclear 310)

Thus, even some of America’s political leadership finally saw the futility of the war, and they had adopted Sarkin’s other maxim of escape: “We have fallen into a hole. Now we must fall out” (98). Similarly, Paul’s imaginary negotiation with Sarkin offers neither of them any benefits from the effort to walk all the way to Paris, but Paul’s adherence to duty, whether out of honor or fear, is more genuinely face-saving than the historical treaty.

So how much has been accomplished in Paul’s six hours of dreaming on the observation post? James C. Wilson offers a negative view of Paul’s resolution, seeing it as a failed effort: “Even in his imagination, Berlin retreats into official slogans and platitudes, unable to either imaginatively or intellectually transcend the propaganda of his own government” (59). Schroeder responds that “personal

politics blinkers critical assessment” (131) in the view that the “peace conference” fails. “Rather,” Schroeder continues,

resolution is realized morally and aesthetically both within the text and without it. . . . The question which Paul Berlin asks (and answers) at the peace table is the one which O’Brien leaves unresolved in *If I Die*: “If inner peace is the true objective, would I win it in exile?” (133)

Myers agrees that Paul’s outcome bodes well for Paul’s mental and spiritual stability:

The willed ingenuity in the observation post produces finally a classical boon—self-knowledge within travail, the partial ordering of chaos that even a statement of positions can provide, the move toward, if not the attainment of, a proper peace. (184)

Dale W. Jones adds that Paul has learned more about the true nature of fortitude:

. . . courage is not genuine when it is divorced from either wisdom or fear. . . . If he has not actually become a hero after his nightlong vigil, he has at least come a step closer in attaining courage, wisdom and self-knowledge. By the end of the novel, Paul Berlin has integrated the disconnected fragments of his experience and transcended the chaos in his own mind. (319-20)

The chaos may not be completely overcome, for some memories still overlap while others remain unexamined.

As for courage, though, Paul at least imagines a heroic journey, and in order to complete it, he performs a slight, but real-world, act of bravery: remaining on duty atop the observation post, even through the "dangerous time" of the "darkest hours" when attack is most likely (124).

Occupying a middle ground, Vannatta thinks that O'Brien's novel ends in "indefiniteness": Paul may have asserted "an existential commitment to one's own choices," but

. . . there is no reason to believe that flight will not once again become an attractive alternative to Paul. For that matter, even the seemingly vanquished goal of heroism, of fighting for God, country, and family, has an obstinate resiliency. (245-46)

The novel's motifs of irresolvable conflict and Paul's divided mind would support such ambiguity. In the encounter with Li Van Hgoc, both sides are right: Li correctly calls Paul's squad prisoners, and the squad correctly shows its intent and ability to escape. In the debate between Doc and Fahyi Rhallon, Doc may be more cynical, but both positions could find vindication in Paul's experience. And in the final negotiation between Sarkin and Paul, both statements of commitment show nobility, but Paul speaks for himself and thereby takes a stand on one side of the division. No sense of irony accompanies this scene, for although the implied author knows more than Paul knows, Paul's actions are not treated in a condescending or disdainful manner; Paul Berlin's stand then does not, as Wilson would suggest, rest on something so flimsy as mere "slogans and platitudes." Nonetheless, the victory of the one side, like most victories in Vietnam, could yet prove temporary; taking a stand and holding to it could be no

more attainable for Paul than “taking a place and keeping it, securing a village and then raising the flag and calling it a victory” (272). In any case, the important point remains that, for the solitary soldier such as Paul, this kind of moral, if temporary, victory can sustain him rather than wear him out.

Paul’s qualified triumph must stand in contrast to the verdict of history as represented by the implied author. Vannatta sees ambiguity on this level as well: “O’Brien exposes the horror and suffering of war, but he stops short of saying that war is ultimately without meaning or justification—even the Vietnam war” (246). The narrative will not, I think, support the phrase after the dash. On the way to Paris, the lessons are several. For instance, superior firepower cannot prevail over committed manpower. And: when the land itself becomes the enemy, deadly conflict follows wherever troops go, virtually imprisoning them before putting them to ignominious flight. And: if an enemy cannot be defeated, then war serves only to destroy the people and culture allegedly being defended. Such conclusions carry no endorsement of the North Vietnamese goals, only the point that, if noble goals of freedom and prosperity merely decorate a policy supporting a government that offers little hope of freedom and prosperity, then war waged is simply for winning and no higher purpose. Furthermore, simply winning in Vietnam, prevailing by attrition, O’Brien’s novel instructs clearly, is impossible. Sending soldiers into such combat may prompt speeches of the proper sentiments but will result in the practical execution of troops: the Vietnam War had been fought and lost before by the French; the US brought only new faces to its involvement in Vietnam, not new policies.

Paul encounters such lessons in the persons of Sarkin, Li Van Hgoc, the Cao Dai, Hamijolli Chand, Fahyi Rhallon, and others, but he needs only to face himself, not answer

for his country's policy. If Paul Berlin knew the political history of the war beforehand, perhaps he would have avoided the draft; if he absorbed accurate political history while in the country, perhaps he would have deserted with Cacciato. Either way, Paul would still need to confront himself and need to justify himself in his own mind. Knowledge may alter choices, but it does not necessarily secure confidence in those choices. Vietnam made choices on all sides insecure. In other wars, the American soldier could sometimes know that, whatever his own involvement, the war's goal was correct and honorable. Not so in Vietnam. The implied author's introduction of several fantastic teachers of history suggests that, regardless of the enemy policy, the allied policy offered no hope of an honorable outcome. Cacciato, in despair, walks away from the war to Paris, prefiguring the American decision to walk away in Paris also. Paul feels fear more than despair, and under the circumstances, his resolution—finding a modicum of personal honor in a terrible enterprise—exhibits an imaginatively humane response to an absurdly vain combat. □

Notes

¹O'Brien continues this confrontation in his latest novel, *The Things They Carried*, but these stories concentrate on personal histories and mostly set national issues aside. O'Brien told Terry Gross that he named his protagonist "Tim O'Brien" because of a sense of play, but also because "it pushed me down inside myself." The new novel thereby takes on added importance to him: ". . . *Cacciato* . . . feels to me a little cerebral. . . . the form of the book . . . has an intellectual feel to it, like artifice, whereas the new one, the stories are simple, tender—I hope. . . . [when] I read these things aloud, as I do at colleges, now and then my voice sometimes cracks a little."

Several motifs from O'Brien's earlier Vietnam stories recur. For example, the game of checkers, in the story "Spin," like basketball in *Cacciato*, has the value of a definitive outcome: "You knew where you stood. You knew the score There was a winner and a loser" (36). However, the problem of moral courage still dominates. Again, many stories deal with actions that may appear to be motivated by bravery or patriotic duty but are actually the result of fear, especially the fear and shame of seeming a coward. As in *If I Die*, this "Tim O'Brien" cannot dodge the draft; on a boat, in the story, "On a Rainy River," and within twenty yards of the Canadian shore, he cannot make himself run: ". . . it had nothing to do with morality. Embarrassment, that's all it was" (62). One story, "The Man I Killed," even imagines an enemy soldier's reluctance to go to war where he "feared that he would perform badly in battle," a fear overcome by the stronger fear "of disgracing himself, and therefore his family and village" should he shirk his duty (141-42).

²O'Brien told Eric James Schroeder he chose Paris as the destination, not only for the historical relevance that I will explicate, but because ". . . it also makes psychological sense. . . . For a naive person, Paris is the obvious choice" ("Two Interviews" 144).

³O'Brien notes, in an interview with Terry Gross, that the slaughter of water buffalo recurs in almost all his writing. Nevertheless, he says the image means "probably nothing" other than "the feel of meat, which was the feel of war." About having actually witnessed such a kill, he admits, "I watched, dumbly"—a stance Paul Berlin takes often—but goes on to say that he understood the anger leading to the seemingly senseless act.

⁴This sort of displacement—imagining another character’s doing something about which Paul feels shame or embarrassment—takes a poignant twist in *The Things They Carried*. One chapter, “Speaking of Courage,” recounts Norman Bowker’s struggle with his memory of failing to rescue a comrade who was literally being swallowed up by the earth. The loss of a comrade, the disappearance into the ground, the sad fact of only almost winning the Silver Star—these thoughts echo Paul’s reflections on what could have happened to Cacciato and did happen to Frenchie and Bernie Lynn.

In the next chapter, though, “Tim O’Brien” retrieves Bowker from imagination to report that Bowker wrote to “O’Brien” recommending the incident as material for a story. The poignancy comes in the admission that absolves Bowker of any responsibility:

In the interests of truth, however, I want to make it clear that Norman Bowker was in no way responsible for what happened to Kiowa. Norman did not experience a failure of nerve that night. He did not freeze up or lose the Silver Star for valor. That part of the story is my own. (182)

Two ensuing chapters, “In the Field” and “Field Trip,” then continue the contemplation of the now non-displaced act. In all, the confession and penance show none of Paul’s avoidance of facts, most evident in his indirect contrition over Lt. Martin’s murder.

⁵Peter Braestrup, a correspondent who was in Saigon at the time, has since made the case that reports from Vietnam about the Tet offensive amounted to a fundamental “distortion of reality” (xi): a tremendous victory over Hanoi’s forces that appeared in the media as a stunning setback instead. John Laurence, another experienced correspondent who worked in Vietnam for five years, has responded that Braestrup has distorted some matters himself and that the reporting at the time accurately represented the best available official information (175-76). Either way, as the legend now has it, Walter Cronkite announced the war could not be won, and President Johnson privately announced that popular opinion could not be won from Cronkite: “If I’ve lost Walter I’ve lost Mr. Average Citizen” (Maclear 199).

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