

Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien was born in 1946 in Austin, Minnesota, and was educated at Macalester College and Harvard University. Drafted into the army during the Vietnam War, he attained the rank of sergeant and received the Purple Heart. His first published work, If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home (1973), relates his experiences in Vietnam. This book is an innovative mixture of alternating chapters of fiction and autobiography in which the following nonfiction account first appeared.

O'Brien's novel Northern Lights (1974) was followed by the acclaimed work Going After Cacciato (1978), which won the National Book Award. Other works include The Nuclear Age (1985), a collection of stories titled The Things They Carried (1990), Tomcat in Love (1998), and most recently July, July (2002).

IF I DIE IN A COMBAT ZONE

The summer of 1968, the summer I turned into a soldier, was a good time for talking about war and peace. Eugene McCarthy was bringing quiet thought to the subject. He was winning votes in the primaries. College students were listening to him, and some of us tried to help out. Lyndon Johnson was almost forgotten, no longer forbidding or feared; Robert Kennedy was dead but not quite forgotten; Richard Nixon looked like a loser. With all the tragedy and change that summer, it was fine weather for discussion.

And, with all of this, there was an induction notice tucked into a corner of my billfold.

So with friends and acquaintances and townspeople, I spent the summer in Fred's antiseptic cafe, drinking coffee and mapping out arguments on Fred's napkins. Or I sat in Chic's tavern, drinking beer with kids from the farms. I played some golf and tore up the pool table down at the bowling alley, keeping an eye open for likely-looking high school girls.

Late at night, the town deserted, two or three of us would drive a car around and around the town's lake, talking about the war, very seriously, moving with care from one argument to the next, trying to make it a dialogue and not a debate. We covered all the big questions: justice, tyranny, self-determination, conscience and the state, God and war and love.

College friends came to visit: "Too bad, I hear you're drafted. What will you do?" 5

I said I didn't know, that I'd let time decide. Maybe something would change, maybe the war would end. Then we'd turn to discuss the matter, talking long, trying out the questions, sleeping late in the mornings.

The summer conversations, spiked with plenty of references to the philosophers and academicians of war, were thoughtful and long and complex and careful. But, in the end, careful and precise argumentation hurt me. It was painful to tread deliberately over all the axioms and assumptions and corollaries when the people on the town's draft board were calling me to duty, smiling so nicely.

"It won't be bad at all," they said. "Stop in and see us when it's over."

So to bring the conversations to a focus and also to try out in real words my secret fears, I argued for running away.

I was persuaded then, and I remain persuaded now, that the war was wrong. And 10
 since it was wrong and since people were dying as a result of it, it was evil. Doubts, of
 course, hedged all this: I had neither the expertise nor the wisdom to synthesize answers;
 most of the facts were clouded, and there was no certainty as to the kind of govern-
 ment that would follow a North Vietnamese victory or, for that matter, an American
 victory, and the specifics of the conflict were hidden away—partly in men's minds,
 partly in the archives of government, and partly in buried, irretrievable history. The war,
 I thought, was wrongly conceived and poorly justified. But perhaps I was mistaken, and
 who really knew, anyway?

Piled on top of this was the town, my family, my teachers, a whole history of the
 prairie. Like magnets, these things pulled in one direction or the other, almost physi-
 cal forces weighting the problem, so that, in the end, it was less reason and more grav-
 ity that was the final influence.

My family was careful that summer. The decision was mine and it was not talked
 about. The town lay there, spread out in the corn and watching me, the mouths of old
 women and Country Club men poised in a kind of eternal readiness to find fault. It was
 not a town, not a Minneapolis or New York, where the son of a father can sometimes
 escape scrutiny. More, I owed the prairie something. For twenty-one years I'd lived
 under its laws, accepted its education, eaten its food, wasted and guzzled its water,
 slept well at night, driven across its highways, dirtied and breathed its air, wallowed
 in its luxuries. I'd played on its Little League teams. I remembered Plato's *Crito*, when
 Socrates, facing certain death—execution, not war—had the chance to escape. But he
 reminded himself that he had seventy years in which he could have left the country, if
 he were not satisfied or felt the agreements he'd made with it were unfair. He had not
 chosen Sparta or Crete. And, I reminded myself, I hadn't thought much about Canada
 until that summer.

The summer passed this way. Gold afternoons on the golf course, a comforting
 feeling that the matter of war would never touch me, nights in the pool hall or drug store,
 talking with townsfolk, turning the questions over and over, being a philosopher.

Near the end of that summer the time came to go to the war. The family indulged
 in a cautious sort of Last Supper together, and afterward my father, who is brave, said
 it was time to report at the bus depot. I moped down to my bedroom and looked the
 place over, feeling quite stupid, thinking that my mother would come in there in a day
 or two and probably cry a little. I trudged back up to the kitchen and put my satchel
 down. Everyone gathered around, saying so long and good health and write and let us
 know if you want anything. My father took up the induction papers, checking on times
 and dates and all the last-minute things, and when I pecked my mother's face and
 grabbed the satchel for comfort, he told me to put it down, that I wasn't supposed to
 report until tomorrow.

After laughing about the mistake, after a flush of red color and a flood of ribbing 15
 and a wave of relief had come and gone, I took a long drive around the lake, looking
 again at the place. Sunset Park, with its picnic table and little beach and a brown wood
 shelter and some families swimming. The Crippled Children's School. Slater Park, more
 kids. A long string of split level houses, painted every color.

The war and my person seemed like twins as I went around the town's lake. Twins
 grafted together and forever together, as if a separation would kill them both.

The thought made me angry.

In the basement of my house I found some scraps of cardboard and paper. With devilish flair, I printed obscene words on them, declaring 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. For many minutes, making up the signs, making up my mind, I was outside the town. I was outside the law, all my old ties to my loves and family broken by the old crayon in my hand. I imagined strutting up and down the sidewalks outside the depot, the bus waiting and the driver blaring his horn, the *Daily Globe* photographer trying to push me into line with the other draftees, the frantic telephone calls, my head buzzing at the deed.

On the cardboard, my strokes of bright red were big and ferocious looking. The language was clear and certain and burned with a hard, defiant, criminal, blasphemous sound. I tried reading it aloud.

Later in the evening I tore the signs into pieces and put the shreds in the garbage can outside, clanging the gray cover down and trapping the messages inside. I went back into the basement. I slipped the crayons into their box, the same stubs of color I'd used a long time before to chalk in reds and greens on Roy Rogers' cowboy boots.

I'd never been a demonstrator, except in the loose sense. True, I'd taken a stand in the school newspaper on the war, trying to show why it seemed wrong. But, mostly, I'd just listened.

"No war is worth losing your life for," a college acquaintance used to argue. "The issue isn't a moral one. It's a matter of efficiency: what's the most efficient way to stay alive when your nation is at war? That's the issue."

But others argued that no war is worth losing your country for, and when asked about the case when a country fights a wrong war, those people just shrugged.

Most of my college friends found easy paths away from the problem, all to their credit. Deferments for this and that. Letters from doctors or chaplains. It was hard to find people who had to think much about the problem. Counsel came from two main quarters, pacifists and veterans of foreign wars.

But neither camp had much to offer. It wasn't a matter of peace, as the pacifists argued, but rather a matter of when and when not to join others in making war. And it wasn't a matter of listening to an ex-lieutenant colonel talk about serving in a right war, when the question was whether to serve in what seemed a wrong one.

On August 13, I went to the bus depot. A Worthington *Daily Globe* photographer took my picture standing by a rail fence with four other draftees.

Then the bus took us through corn fields, to little towns along the way—Lismore and Rushmore and Adrian—where other recruits came aboard. With some of the tough guys drinking beer and howling in the back seats, brandishing their empty cans and calling one another "scum" and "trainee" and "GI Joe," with all this noise and hearty farewelling, we went to Sioux Falls. We spent the night in a YMCA. I went out alone for a beer, drank it in a corner booth, then I bought a book and read it in my room.

By noon the next day our hands were in the air, even the tough guys. We recited the proper words, some of us loudly and daringly and others in bewilderment. It was a brightly lighted room, wood paneled. A flag gave the place the right colors, there was some smoke in the air. We said the words, and we were soldiers.

I'd never been much of a fighter. I was afraid of bullies. Their ripe muscles made me angry: a frustrated anger. Still, I deferred to no one. Positively lorded myself over inferiors. And on top of that was the matter of conscience and conviction, uncertain and surface-deep but pure nonetheless: I was a confirmed liberal, not a pacifist; but I would have cast my ballot to end the Vietnam war immediately, I would have voted for Eugene McCarthy, hoping he would make peace. I was not soldier material, that was certain.

But I submitted. All the personal history, all the midnight conversations and books and beliefs and learning, were crumpled by abstention, extinguished by forfeiture, for lack of oxygen, by a sort of sleepwalking default. It was no decision, no chain of ideas or reasons, that steered me into the war.

It was an intellectual and physical stand-off, and I did not have the energy to see it to an end. I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war. But neither did I want to upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, the people I knew, and my own private world. It was not that I valued that order. But I feared its opposite, inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all.

And the stand-off is still there. I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from one who knows, from one who's been there and come back, an old soldier looking back at a dying war.

That would be good. It would be fine to integrate it all to persuade my younger brother and perhaps some others to say no to wars and other battles.

Or it would be fine to confirm the odd beliefs about war: it's horrible, but it's a crucible of men and events and, in the end, it makes more of a man out of you.

But, still, none of these notions seems right. Men are killed, dead human beings are heavy and awkward to carry, things smell different in Vietnam, soldiers are afraid and often brave, drill sergeants are boors, some men think the war is proper and just and others don't and most don't care. Is that the stuff for a morality lesson, even for a theme?

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.

Questions for Discussion and Writing

1. What conflicting sets of values weighed on O'Brien when he learned he was drafted? Of these, which was the most significant in determining his ultimate decision?
2. Which features of this account provide insight into a Tim O'Brien who was very different from the one townspeople knew?
3. What do you think you would have done if you were in the same situation as O'Brien?