

Fallen Angels Study Guide

Fallen Angels by Walter Dean Myers

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Plot Summary

Richie Perry is a recent high school graduate who gave up dreams of an expensive college education to join the United States Army. An excellent writer, Richie hopes one day to be able to write like the author James Baldwin. In the meantime, he sends money home to support his younger brother and mother. Richie has a strained relationship with his mother, an alcoholic who suffers from depression, and worries about his teenage brother's safety in the racially tense streets of Harlem.

Richie is en route to Vietnam when the book opens. He was trained in Fort Devens, Texas and is being sent with his unit to the conflict he hears is almost over. He meets Army nurse Judy Duncan and his squad mate Harold "Peewee" Gates on the flight. Judy leaves for an Army medical facility and Richie and Peewee are sent to join the Twenty-second replacement company. Richie hears the company will soon be leaving for Hawaii as peace talks are in the works and he talks to another

oldier who has been there nine months without seeing any fighting.

As time goes on, however, Richie finds himself in the middle of combat and death. His squad mate Jenkins is killed a few weeks into the tour of duty after stepping on a booby trap set by the Americans. On patrol with television crews, Richie's squad kills a Vietnamese man and claims he is an enemy soldier, though the papers on the man prove otherwise. Richie sees official paperwork from the incident and notices his company's commander, Captain Stewart, has written three enemy soldiers were killed. It becomes clear to Richie that Captain Stewart is more interested in getting a promotion than he is in sending his soldiers home alive.

When Richie's commander, Lieutenant Carroll, is killed in combat, Richie and his squad are grief-stricken and Richie really begins to question his role in the war. He debates whether to tell his mother and his brother Kenny the truth about the war, especially after he kills someone, or to remain vague in order to protect them. Word gets around camp that Richie is a good writer and he is asked to write letters to deceased soldiers' families, and even to Peewee's ex-girlfriend. Captain Stewart tells Richie if he knew how to type, he would put him behind a desk to work for him in the office.

As combat amps up, Richie becomes more comfortable fighting. He is wounded in battle and flown to a military hospital to recover. His wounds are not serious enough to be sent home and he spends a few weeks recovering. Richie meets other soldiers in worse shape than he is and Judy Duncan, the nurse from his trip over, visits him in his hospital bed. When Richie has to return to his squad, he is nervous and considers running away rather than fighting again. He realizes he has nowhere to run, however, and returns to fight with his squad.

As troops dwindle, a haughty soldier in the squad named Brunner is asked to lead them on a dangerous patrol to track down North Vietnamese forces along a river. Brunner's inexperience shines through and Richie and his squad find themselves trapped in a

firefight. Richie and Peewee escape to a ridge and spend the night in a spider hole. The next morning they return to the helicopter landing zone and observe Vietnamese troops planning an ambush when the helicopter lands. Richie and Peewee begin firing at the hidden troops as the helicopter approaches, forcing them out of hiding and into the fire from the choppers.

Richie and Peewee are both injured trying to board the helicopter and are sent to a military hospital. They are told they will both be returning to America. Richie pays a record keeper to look up the whereabouts of Judy Duncan and finds out that she was killed when a field hospital came under fire. Richie and Peewee stand tall with their injuries as a plane of new recruits lands. On the flight back home, the young men hold hands in a display of friendship, loyalty and relief to be leaving the war.



Chapter 1-3

Summary

Chapter 1: Richie Perry is a seventeen year old from New York on his way to fight with the U.S. Army in Vietnam. On the airplane ride from Massachusetts to Anchorage, Richie meets Judy Duncan, an Army nurse from Texas who is also on her way to Vietnam. The two talk about where they grew up and what they expect will happen in Vietnam. From Anchorage, the group flies to Osaka, Japan and spends the night in the airport before boarding a plane for Vietnam the next morning. The plane lands at the Tan Son Nhut airport at 2 p.m. that day, and the soldiers line up in the hot, muggy heat. The medics, including Judy, board a bus and leave for their post. Judy gives Richie a smile and a wave and is gone.

Richie is assigned to the Twenty-second replacement company and meets up with Harold Gates, to whom he had spoken on the plane. Harold insists Richie call him "Peewee" and then says all of the Vietnamese people around them have to be Vietcong. Richie says it's unlikely the enemy would be cleaning their bathroom and Peewee responds with a story about a guy who got shot in the stomach over a game of pool. Peewee says he is from Chicago. He begins yelling the word "Cong" at a woman cleaning the barracks, until she looks uncomfortable and leaves. Another soldier in the unit yells across the room that if someone talked crazy to him, he would leave, too. Peewee tells the significantly taller young man he must be a Cong too – and an ugly one, at that. The larger man comes over to Peewee and calls him "Boy." Peewee kicks him in his crotch and pulls a switchblade out from under his pillow. The bigger boy leaves, muttering that Peewee would really be in trouble if he didn't have a knife.

Chapter 2: Richie explains he had wanted to go to college, but could not afford it. Besides, he could send the money he made in the Army back home to his mom and little brother, Kenny. Richie and Kenny talked a lot about life in the week before Richie shipped out and he tried to reassure his kid brother that he would return safe. Kenny told Richie he hoped Richie's "team" would win in Vietnam.

At breakfast, Peewee and Richie talk more about life. Peewee says he likes the Army so far because everyone gets the same things, like boots and guns. He explains that back home, he would be the only one not to get new shoes or a new bike when the other kids did. Richie notices there are a lot of black soldiers. One of them was making the rounds among the other black men, saying they all needed to stick together and watch each other's backs in the fighting. He wants Peewee and Richie to enter a blood pact with him, but they decline. Another black man talks with Peewee and Richie and says he has been in Vietnam for nine months and has not seen any fighting yet. The boys pass the next few days playing checkers.

On Richie's ninth day in Vietnam, he and Peewee meet a new soldier, Jenkins, who is scared almost to tears about being in Vietnam. Peewee decides to give the new guy a



hard time and tells him that you have to kill as many Vietcong as the number of pounds you weigh before the Army will let you go home. That night, mosquitoes descend on Richie and his comrades, leaving them covered in bites.

The next day, orientation takes place. A young lieutenant tells the boys to take their pills to prevent malaria, stay away from the women, avoid the black market and not to use dope. Richie, Peewee and Jenkins are assigned to the 196th in Chu Lai, a unit that keeps an eye out for the enemy then alerts the Marines, who take care of them. Waiting for their ride to the airport, Peewee asks Richie if he is scared. Richie says yes, he is scared and asks Peewee if he is too. Peewee says he is more surprised than scared and he thought the fighting was all over in Vietnam. The boys make a pact by spitting on their palms and shaking hands. Jenkins is crying out of fear. All three jump in the truck and head for the airport.

Chapter 3: The plane lands in Chu Lai and the three boys take a truck to the base. They meet Johnson, a big muscular soldier who will be in their group. He lifts a pump into the back of the truck singlehandedly, a heavy pump the other three together could not lift. Richie asks the captain at the base if his medical profile has arrived. The captain asks if Richie's knee is bothering him and Richie answers "no" but says it tends to give out from time to time. The captain says to mention it to his company commander but Richie gets the feeling the officer does not care about Richie's knee troubles. The three boys, along with Johnson, are assigned to the Alpha Company, located in the "Deep Boonies."

At lunch, Jenkins explains he is trained in infantry, a fact that surprises the other boys. Jenkins says his father is a colonel who is hoping his son will go to Officers Candidate School after his service in Vietnam. Johnson joins the other young men and says he is from Savannah, Georgia. Peewee seems to think it's fun to agitate Johnson and calls him a "country boy." Despite his size, Johnson remains calm and ignores Peewee's taunting. While waiting for the chopper, Jenkins sits with his head in his hands. Richie asks him if he is okay and Jenkins admits he believes he will die in Vietnam. Richie says there is no reason to think that, especially since the fighting is over. Jenkins asks who told Richie that and when Richie responds it was a major stateside, Jenkins remarks the guy must have never been to Vietnam. The chopper comes too late, and the boys spend the night at headquarters. Richie awakes to the sounds of artillery and goes outside to listen. He sees plumes of white and red smoke against the dark sky.

The boys leave for the Alpha Company the next morning. It is the first helicopter ride for Richie and he hates the noise. When they land, a captain tells Richie he will call for his medical records but the squad will likely be leaving for Hawaii in a few days. Richie, Peewee and Jenkins are issued M-16 rifles. Johnson receives an M-60 – a gun Richie says fits Johnson. They find a bunk and meet their platoon leader, Carroll. He tells the guys to keep their minds on their work and wishes them good luck. Richie tries again to write a letter to his mother, but cannot find anything to say that seems right.

Richie thinks back to Stuyvesant High School and his basketball playing days. When he was fifteen, he talked to his English teacher about how there were moments on the court when he could feel the game taking on its own momentum, without his



involvement, and that everything just sort of went on as he watched from the outside. She tells Richie not giving in and putting yourself in the action is what separates humans from heroes. Richie had not really understood what she meant.

In the bunks, the four new guys meet the rest of the squad and Sergeant Simpson. He calls the boys “cherries” and tells them he only has 120 days left and that they better not get him killed. In the afternoon, the squad gets orders to go out on patrol because a plane had spotted what looked like enemy setting up surveying instruments. Richie is nervous but exhilarated. The group patrols for an hour before the chopper returns to pick them up. Simpson seems pleased with the new guys and tells them they looked “okay out there.” The squad deplanes and starts toward the base, when all of the sudden everyone hits the ground. Simpson orders them to walk into the base. After Richie goes through the barbed wire gate, he turns around to see Jenkins with a piece of metal coming out of his chest. Blood gurgles out of Jenkins chest and he dies moments later.

Analysis

Richie Perry is a smart kid who should be in college. Since he can't afford college, and has a mother and little brother to support, he joins the Army. He doesn't dislike being in the service, especially when a knee injury renders him unfit for combat. Despite his knee, Richie is sent to Vietnam where he is still relatively calm because he has been told all of the fighting is over anyway. Even when he is sent to the “Deep Boonies” to work alongside the Alpha Company, Richie believes his squad will be leaving in a few days for Hawaii. His understandable naivety is challenged when Richie hears and sees artillery fire in the distance. Richie's ill-conceived concept that he is somehow “safe” is completely shattered when Jenkins dies after stepping on a booby trap near the base. His opinion of the war in Vietnam, and of his role in it, changes in an instant.

The young men and women Richie encounters in the Army are really still boys and girls. Many are fresh out of high school, or have not completed it. They interact with each other like they are socializing in their school cafeteria, not like they are in a war zone far from home. Though relationships are just beginning to form, it is clear the young people of the Army share a close bond already. Though Richie barely knows Jenkins, he feels the need to reassure him and tell him he will be okay. Peewee jokes with the other members of the squad and constantly reminds everyone the Vietcong is the enemy. The spit handshake that Peewee and Richie share shows the two are aware of the strong bond of their friendship, though they do not yet know what will happen.

Vocabulary

muggy, Vietcong, Quonset, artillery, queasy, Chu Lai, lieutenant, corporal, barracks, sputtering, pen-pal, hemophilia, hooch, truce, Cu Chi, gung ho, quota, venereal, orientation, infantry, colonel, latrine, agitating, airborne, surveillance, silhouettes, fatigues, concave



Chapter 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4: Sergeant Simpson and Lieutenant Carroll put Jenkins' body in a body bag. Richie is shaken up by the whole incident and Monaco tries to comfort him. Lieutenant Carroll comes into the bunks and says a prayer for Jenkins. In the prayer, he calls Jenkins an "angel warrior." The next morning, Richie asks Carroll why he called Jenkins that and Carroll explains that is the term his father used to use for soldiers because they are usually boys, not old enough to vote. Later in the day, the young men and Carroll discuss theology. Brewster, called Brew, tells Carroll he got a letter from a theology school in Virginia that will keep his spot open for six months. Carroll says he thought about going to theology school before but now he is a changed person. When Carroll leaves, another soldier named Walowick explains the lieutenant used to be a lot different. One night while the unit was on patrol, Carroll and the others were forced to shoot several enemy soldiers in order to save their own. The unit still suffered some fatalities and Carroll was never the same.

An enemy spy is captured and brought into camp. Peewee goes into the storage unit where the Vietcong is located and starts talking to him. He says that the VC knows all about Chicago and has been to movies on State Street. When the captain comes in, the VC tries to steal Peewee's pistol and is knocked to the ground. Peewee says if the Cong ever make it to State Street, he wants to be on their side. Lobel says if Hollywood will just give the Vietcong roles in movies, the war will be over in no time. He explains that German and Japanese people were happy following World War II because they were given bit parts in war movies.

The squad goes to a nearby village as goodwill ambassadors. They tell the villagers if they want to stop being Communists, they are welcome to come to the other side. The squad passes out chocolates, food and other supplies. Lobel and Richie meet a little girl named An Linh who rides around on Lobel's shoulders and holds Richie's hand. The boys decide to rename her Arielle because that will be a good Hollywood name when she stars in a movie about the war.

That night, Sergeant Simpson talks to Peewee and Richie as they eat dinner. He asks how they like the squad so far. Simpson tells the boys that Captain Stewart wants to make the rank of major but needs a higher body count. He says the captain needing a higher body count is everyone's problem.

Chapter 5: At the camp, the soldiers pass their time leisurely. Richie gets a letter from his mother catching him up on life at home. The unit watches a Julie Andrews movie a few different times – once normally, once with the reel off-kilter and once without sound so they can provide their own dialogue. They listen to radio news broadcasts and hear about fighting in other parts of Vietnam and how peace talks are ongoing in Paris.



Richie begins to wish he could kill a Vietcong, just so he will have a story to tell his little brother Kenny.

One morning, jets start looping overhead and Richie can hear combat about five miles away. The entire Alpha Company is assembled to be sent in to push a large group of Vietcong back. As Richie and his squad ride in the chopper to the battlefield, he is ashamed he does not know a prayer to say. The gunner in the chopper fires round after round of ammunition into the jungle below. When the chopper reaches the landing zone, it hovers about ten feet from the ground and the squad jumps out. They spread out and hold position for nearly an hour before being picked up again. Back at camp, Sergeant Simpson tells the squad the other company lost nine men. He says there is still talk of the squad going to Hawaii but there is also talk of a surveillance team is being sent in, an idea he doesn't like.

Lieutenant Carroll pulls Richie aside and asks him about his knee. He explains if the knee is a problem, he will request Richie be reassigned because the whole unit depends on his being healthy. Richie insists his knee is not bothering him and he would like to stay. Carroll decides Richie can stay with the squad until the medical record arrives and then they can reassess. When Carroll leaves, Peewee says Richie should not try to be a hero, but even so, he probably would have said the same thing. Richie wonders what he, or anyone, is really doing in Vietnam.

Chapter 6: Richie and Lobel are put on guard duty for a four-hour shift. Richie is nervous but Lobel says he just considers it to be like acting in a scene in a movie. The two discuss what roles each guy would play and Lobel says his uncle is a big Hollywood director. Richie asks if Lobel was drafted and Lobel answers he enlisted and it's a long story. Richie does not press for more details.

A television news crew comes to Alpha Company and starts filming everything. The crew asks each member of the squad what they are doing in Vietnam. Richie says he is there because he would rather fight for his country abroad than bring fighting to the streets of the U.S. Lieutenant Carroll tells the squad they are going on patrol and the television crew is coming with them. At the landing zone, Monaco is designated point man and Johnson is placed at the back of the squad. The television crew is in the middle, filming everything. Monaco opens fire and other members of the squad follow suit. Richie fires his weapon, but nothing happens. Carroll calls for a cease fire and Walowick pulls the dead body of a Vietnamese man from the trees. Carroll tells Richie to be sure to load a new clip after he fires and Richie realizes his gun was never loaded in the first place.

Back at the camp, the body of the shot man is laid out. The television crews film it and take pictures, some with a weapon next to the corpse. Sergeant Simpson tells the squad the man was not actually a Vietcong after all. That they had found papers on him that proved he was North Vietnamese regular. Simpson brushes it off, saying he didn't get to be a short-timer worrying about things like that.



Monaco encourages the squad to practice volleyball. He has a \$25 bet against a team from the Charlie Company. Brew says that team has already beaten them six times. Monaco says the tall, star player for the opposing team was hit in a firefight and won't be playing.

Analysis

Richie experiences his first taste of real battle in this section of the book. Though he does not have to shoot at anyone on his guard duty, Richie is aware he must be prepared to fire his weapon at any moment. While Lobel takes the guard duty lightly, Richie is aware of what he is expected to do if called upon. Shots are fired when the squad goes on patrol and Richie is unsure how to react. As guns fire around him, Richie tries to see what they are firing at and discovers he doesn't even have a loaded clip in his gun. Though he is in the middle of the action, Richie is not an active participant.

The propaganda of war is explored when the television crews arrive at Alpha Company. The soldiers all give sound-bite worthy answers when asked why they are in Vietnam, though none of them is sure of the truth. Despite finding out the Vietnamese man killed is not an enemy soldier, the television crews lay him out, surround him with weapons and make it look like he was an enemy soldier. Richie sees that exploiting the war is an opportunity for some people to get ahead, such as Captain Stewart and the television crews.

Vocabulary

footlocker, theology, white phosphorous, Chieu Hoi, smirk, Communists, mojo, Baptist, formaldehyde, makeshift, Molotov cocktail, skinhead, convoy, battalion, flank, foxhole, protrusions, grenade, starlets, interracial



Chapter 7-9

Summary

Chapter 7: The unit medic, Jamal, comes by to hand out malaria pills and tells Richie he heard they shot three VCs that day. Richie argues that only one was killed and Jamal says the report he read said three. Richie thinks about his friend Howard in New York and remembers how he used to send Howard mail a lot when Howard went to prison for a few years. Richie decides he will write Howard a letter and hope for one in return. The guys playing volleyball return and tell Richie they won. Richie tells Walowick about the report saying three were killed and Walowick says he doesn't care what it says as long as it is someone on the other side dying.

Richie thinks back to a night in Harlem. He remembers it was past 11 p.m. and he was walking home. He passed a young girl who looked frightened and told Richie that the Rovers, a gang from Brooklyn, were in the neighborhood looking for someone. Richie witnesses a drive-by shooting and sees someone die right in front of his eyes.

Back in Vietnam, Richie wakes up in the middle of the night with the worst stomach pain of his life. The medic diagnoses Richie with "the shits" and Richie spends the next 24 hours with diarrhea and stomach cramps. He misses patrol with his squad. Richie feels stronger the next day but stays in bed recovering. Walowick and Johnson get in a fist fight with so much fury it takes six people to break it up. Lieutenant Carroll breaks his tooth in the scuffle. Peewee asks Richie to write a letter to his girl back in Chicago for him. In it, Peewee tells Earlene he knows it's hard to wait but that he hopes she won't marry Eddie Thompson before he gets back. Richie finished the letter then asks Peewee if he thinks Earlene will wait for him. Peewee says Earlene has already married the guy and he just wrote the letter to break her heart.

The next morning Richie and his squad are awakened by the sound of helicopters. Lieutenant Carroll does not know what all the commotion is about and after breakfast, it calms down. Later that morning, Carroll tells Richie to get his gear. Carroll is sending Richie on patrol with Charlie Company because they requested an extra person. Since Richie missed patrols earlier in the week, Carroll says he has to send him.

Chapter 8: Richie is briefed on Charlie Company's patrol plan and is paired with a machine-gunner named Scotty. Sensing Richie's nervousness, Scotty makes small talk. He tells Richie Charlie Company is going to be the first to stand down in the war. The platoon boards helicopters for the flight to the site of the patrol and Richie works alongside Scotty.

For most of the patrol, Richie and Scotty sit in silence. They start to pack up their gear when shots ring out. Scotty starts shooting the M-60 in the direction the other shooters had aimed. A lieutenant calls for white phosphorus and three rounds are shot toward the target. Suddenly the same lieutenant starts calling for a cease fire, waving his arms



frantically. A chopper flies past where Richie and Scotty are hunkered down to the spot where the shots were aimed. Scotty tells Richie he thinks they just shot at another platoon.

Richie and Scotty walk toward the scene of the wreckage and find out that they had been shooting at another platoon. The medevacs are on the scene trying to save the wounded soldiers and many are already dead. When Richie returns to his squad, Lieutenant Carroll asks him if he is okay. A few of Richie's squad members say they heard the Charlie Company got a bunch of Vietcong. Richie tells Peewee and Monaco the truth – that the fourth platoon had attacked the first platoon with gunfire. Monaco seems angry with Richie but Peewee took Richie out of the being the only truthful observer of the scenario by saying, “they messed up bad.”

Richie remembers his little brother Kenny's birthday is on Thanksgiving. He asks Lieutenant Carroll if he is allowed to send a knife in the mail and Carroll gives him a black silk jacket to send to Kenny instead. After he mails the jacket, Kenny stops back by Carroll's bunk and the two each take a shot of Jack Daniels whiskey. Richie throws up.

That night, Richie has trouble sleeping. He keeps thinking about the wounded and dead bodies he saw that day. He asks Brew where to find the Lord's Prayer in the Bible. Brew tells Richie his Bible has an index in the back and that Richie can come borrow it anytime he would like. Richie asks Brew if he prayed a lot before Vietnam and Brew says not nearly as much as he does now.

Chapter 9: Richie's squad is chosen to go on a pacification mission in a nearby village. Lobel tells Richie they are like killers in a movie and Richie tells Lobel that he is no killer. The squad takes gifts into each hut and tries to make peace with the villagers. Richie notes he feels large walking next to the small Vietnamese people and his M-16 makes him feel more important. He sees Brunner steal a small statue from a hut and Richie voices his disapproval. Brunner gives Richie the finger and Johnson steps in. Brunner backs off.

Walowick finds jars of salve in one of the huts. Lieutenant Carroll says that they look like salves of some sort. Richie tells Peewee about it, and Peewee wants to buy the jars. The two go back to the hut and try to decipher what the salves are for. Eventually, Peewee pays \$3 for a few jars of salve for hair and feet. Brunner tells Carroll he thinks one of the older girls in the village is a Vietcong, but Carroll says not to worry about it.

When the squad gets back to the base, they hear they are scheduled for another pacification mission the next day. A little while later, Richie hears the pacification mission was cancelled. Monaco tells the others that Captain Stewart got the squad out of it because you can't get a body count going on goodwill missions. Lobel gets a letter from his father and in it, his father expresses disappointment that Lobel is in a war, killing innocent people. Lobel says the only reason he joined the Army is so his father will stop thinking he is gay and now his father is disappointed for another reason.



At mail call, Richie gets a letter from his little brother. Kenny says there is a new neighborhood youth basketball league starting up he wants to join. He asks for \$10 to pay the league fee and Richie sends him \$20. Richie's squad gets word a pacification mission from Echo Company got hit visiting the same village Alpha Company had been to. Two guys were shot and now the Alpha Company would have to go back. Sergeant Simpson says the Vietcong goes into any village the Americans visit and terrorize the citizens. The Alpha Company will wait outside the village and watch for Vietcong to enter.

Analysis

The flaws in the military tactics of the Vietnam War become apparent to Richie in this section. He starts to question the legitimacy of the American presence and fighting tactics in Vietnam. The first questionable thing that happens to Richie is when Captain Stewart allows a report to be filed saying three Vietcong were killed, when Richie knows that only one died. Richie also knows the man who was killed was not even an enemy soldier, but in fact a Vietnamese man from the camp the Americans are trying to protect. The rumors that Captain Stewart is going after a promotion to major seem more real to Richie as he sees firsthand how desperate Stewart is to report enemy soldiers killed. If Stewart is willing to lie about body counts, what else is he willing to do to get his promotion and who will he put in harm's way?

The friendly fire incident changes Richie. What he thinks is his first real look at battle against the enemy turns out to be an error that kills fellow American soldiers. Even though Richie does not actually fire at anyone, he knows he has a responsibility for what happened and it eats away at his conscience. He is also uneasy with the fact that the platoon he was with was simply following orders when they fired on their comrades. If another platoon can be attacked by their allies, how long will it be before Richie's squad is in the line of friendly fire?

Vocabulary

cordite, sector, barrage, pacification, hamlet, philosopher, faggot, flak jacket, salve, piasters, withered, rice paddies, plasma, muzzle, rucksack, bandoliers, cootie, appendicitis, Black Pride, Communists, malaria



Chapter 10-12

Summary

Chapter 10: That night Richie's platoon heads back toward the village where the Vietcong had been spotted. Richie's squad set up near a small cemetery with Monaco as point man. Richie sits in the dark quietly and thinks about his mother and Kenny back home. He wonders if the Vietcong already know his squad is there and if he is a sitting duck. Richie thinks about how he is a virgin and that it would be a shame for him to die without ever having experienced intimate love. After a few hours, Richie hears Vietnamese voices in the distance and his squad begins firing. A few flares are sent up and the squad can see the enemy soldiers they are killing. Peewee finds a tunnel, covered by underbrush, and Sergeant Simpson throws a grenade down the tunnel.

The squad starts to retreat and a shot comes from a different direction. Lieutenant Carroll is hit. Johnson starts shooting toward the village with his M-60 and Carroll is dragged by others to the landing zone to await the chopper. The whole squad flies to the hospital at Chu Lai and waits outside while Carroll is treated. A medic tells the squad Carroll was shot under the armpit and he won't survive. Monaco says a prayer for Carroll similar to the one he had said for other fallen soldiers, calling him an "angel warrior."

Chapter 11: The squad is shocked at losing Lieutenant Carroll and is unsure how to handle the grief. Sergeant Simpson asks Richie to write Carroll's wife a letter about the honorable way he died. To prepare for the letter, Richie looks through Carroll's personal stuff. He finds letters Carroll had written to his wife, Lois, back in Kansas. In one letter, he talks about the bookstore the couple planned to open when he got back from Vietnam. Carroll asks his wife to name their unborn daughter Karen, after Lois' mother. Richie starts the letter by explaining who he is and tells Lois that her husband died honorably and bravely.

The next day, Lobel tells Richie that he thinks Carroll's death was his fault. Lobel says he was so frightened in the fighting he didn't fire his weapon enough. He thinks if he had fought harder, Carroll would still be alive. Richie and Peewee reassure Lobel it is no one's fault but the Vietcong enemy. All the boys agree they didn't actually see an enemy face until the fighting was over.

Captain Stewart asks to see Richie. He tells Richie the letter he wrote to Carroll's wife was really good. Stewart asks Richie if he can type because he could use a guy with good English and typing skills in his office. Richie says he can't type. While in Stewart's office, Richie hears a conversation about a surge in Vietcong presence and an increase in American casualties.

Richie's platoon gets a new leader, a reconnaissance expert who is only twenty-five named Lieutenant Gearhart. The next day Richie's squad is asked to escort a civilian



pacification team. Four young guys, one with a wife and child, go into the village Richie's squad had visited. The rumor in the squad is that they are members of the CIA. Richie does not like civilians becoming involved in military operations.

Back at the base, Peewee gets a letter from Richie's mother. When Peewee is out of the room, Richie reads it. The letter tells Peewee he seems like a nice young man and to keep an eye out for Richie because she loves him very much. Richie is sad his mother tells Peewee that she loves him, when she has trouble saying it to Richie directly. The squad watches a Christmas movie and at the end, the news footage they had been a part of airs. Richie decides he looks old and sloppy next to the other guys. The squad is silently sad when Lieutenant Carroll comes on the screen.

Chapter 12: The guys discuss a newspaper article all about young Americans burning their draft cards. Brunner calls the card-burners "faggots and Commies" but Brew says that he considered running away to Canada when he was drafted. Brew says however, he didn't have the nerve to run and ended up in Vietnam instead.

The squad is awakened by a rocket attack. They run for the bunkers as shots are fired from above. The attack ends relatively quickly and no one is hurt. Richie is unable to get back to sleep and he talks to Johnson about the men burning their draft cards. Richie says he didn't think much about going into the Army when he was still in Harlem, but he is thinking about his decision a lot now. Johnson says Vietnam doesn't mean anything but it's just America's way of proving if there is somewhere to be fighting, America will fight. Peewee is awake when Richie returns to his bunk and he sprays insect repellent around the outside of Richie's mosquito netting. Richie complains he can't breathe and then lays awake wondering if what Johnson said is true.

Analysis

Richie's squad suffers a huge blow when Lieutenant Carroll dies after being shot in combat. Carroll had been the only leader to treat the young men respectfully and to be sympathetic toward their fears. Richie and his comrades had come to rely on Carroll's leadership, even when they felt they couldn't rely on anything else to save them. Monaco's prayer, modeled after the prayers Carroll had said over other fallen soldiers, shows the great admiration the squad had of their lead "angel warrior."

The talent Richie has with words begins to make a mark on the Alpha Company. Captain Stewart notices the strong writing style Richie has and compliments him, saying he could use a guy like Richie in his office if Richie knew how to type. While Richie often feels insecure in his fighting style, his words contribute to the squad in a way the other soldiers can't. His no-nonsense approach to the letter to Lieutenant Carroll's wife proves his ability to tell the truth in an eloquent way – something rare in the Vietnam conflict.

Vocabulary

reconnaissance, Commie, draft card, bucking, intimate, reptilian, civilians, infiltrating, orderly, demilitarized



Chapter 13-15

Summary

Chapter 13: A few days before Christmas, 1967, Richie and Peewee discuss whether they should try to have sex with a foreign woman before the end of the war. Word was a truce was going to be reached in time for the Vietnamese New Year. Richie wonders if he will be ready to face the world again, especially since he knows there has been a lot of racial tension while he has been deployed. The squad eats their regular meal of roast beef, mashed potatoes, peas and carrots and carrot cake for Christmas dinner.

Word comes to the camp that an established Vietnamese Army was joining the fight against the Americans. Worrying about Vietcong guerrilla fighters was one thing, but an organized army was a totally different thing. Richie can hear the booming of artillery fighting in the distance and knows a truce is not even close to being reached. Richie's squad is assigned to stop nighttime Vietnamese contact between two villages and they get two new guys before the assignment – Nate Turner and Darren Lewis.

The squad sets up on a narrow path and right away, Sergeant Simpson is nervous. He feels the location is unsafe for the squad but Lieutenant Gearhart says he knows what he is doing and to get the men set up. Richie is in charge of setting up a claymore weapon that fires metal shards for sixty meters. After sitting in position for a while, the squad begins firing. In the light of a flare, Richie sees a Vietcong turn his claymore around and the squad hits the ground, trying to avoid the metal shards. Richie is surprised he is not hit. Based on the number of muzzle blasts, Richie realizes his squad is outnumbered and his stomach turns. The muzzle blasts start getting farther away and Richie's squad starts to retreat through a rice paddy. It starts to rain heavily and the squad waits a long time for the chopper to pick them up. Gearhart sets off a flare to alert the chopper and firing starts behind the squad. The new guy, Nate Turner, is hit and killed. Gearhart is visibly upset it is his fault the enemy found their location.

Back at the camp, Sergeant Simpson confronts Richie about the claymore. Simpson says he saw an enemy soldier turn the claymore around. If he turned it but none of Richie's squad was hit by it, then that means Richie must have set the weapon to face the squad in the first place.

Chapter 14: Richie thinks about the firefight and how he is glad he did not know the dead soldier better. Monaco gets a letter from his girl Julie back home and in it, she asks him to marry her when he gets home. The guys in the squad decide to take a vote on it and vote in favor, 7 – 2, that Monaco marries her. He says he will invite everyone to the wedding and will be sure to plan it after everyone is home from Vietnam. Richie is called to Captain Stewart's office. He asks Richie about the battle and wonders how many enemy soldiers were killed. Richie says he is not sure and Stewart suggests twenty or thirty. Richie says it probably wasn't that many. Stewart gives Richie a letter that Gearhart has written to Nate Turner's family. He asks Richie to take a look at the



letter and rewrite it. In the original letter, Gearhart tells Nate's family he was killed after Gearhart exposed him to the enemy. Richie rewrites it, telling the truth but taking the blame off of Gearhart. Jamal brings the body count report for Richie to see, and Richie notices Captain Stewart has listed twenty-eight enemy soldiers killed from the firefight.

The squad gets word the village they had pacified earlier was being harassed by Vietcong. All of Alpha Company is sent to the village just before an intelligence report says the enemy is planning to arrive. When the company arrives, the village has already been attacked and huts are on fire. The soldiers immediately begin going into huts, looking for wounded villagers and hidden enemy soldiers. All of the soldiers are shaken by the amount of death and destruction in the village. Richie stops to look at some framed pictures in a hut and hears a click behind him. He turns to find a Vietcong soldier with a gun, attempting to shoot Richie. The gun is jammed. Richie fires his M-16 at the enemy's leg and then begins firing at his face. Sergeant Simpson comes into the hut and tells Richie the enemy is dead. Peewee puts his arm around Richie and leads him out of the hut.

The next hut Peewee and Richie go into has tea brewing and Peewee tries to get Richie to have some. Richie does not want any and they walk back out. Peewee decides to go back in again because he is uneasy about a mat on the floor. He fires twice and then Richie pulls the mat back. A wounded Vietcong lies underneath it. Sergeant Simpson comes in and kills the Vietcong with one more shot. The company surrounds the village and evacuates it before setting it on fire. Choppers come to take the villagers and soldiers away. Peewee is in such shock he cannot move his legs. The medic determines he is not wounded and Peewee makes fun of his immobile condition.

The squad gets word they will be moving base to a spot near Tam Ky. Lobel tells the rest of the squad they will be sitting ducks at Tam Ky because it is a smaller base than the others and centrally located. The morning the outfit is moving, Peewee wakes up with a puffed up, bloated face. Peewee refuses to tell Lieutenant Gearhart why his face is messed up but tells Richie that he put some of the Vietnamese salve to grow hair on his face, hoping to grow a mustache.

Chapter 15: None of Richie's squad feels comfortable with the new base outside Tam Ky. The buildings are flimsy and the squads are forced to hide in trenches when there is incoming fire. Alpha Company starts doing patrols with ARVN, a group of Vietnamese soldiers who are learning the best military tactics to take over when the Americans leave. Richie's squad and one other from Alpha Company, along with two ARVN squads, go out on an ambush where suspected Vietcong walk at night. They form an "L" ambush shape. It is so dark that Richie cannot see his squad-mates. He begins to fear being left alone out in the dark simply because he loses track of the group. A leech lands on Richie's wrist and he tries to remove it with his bayonet and only succeeds at getting half of it. After a few hours, they hear voices. Lieutenant Gearhart holds off on calling for the attack because there are so many voices he knows his squads are outnumbered. Once the Vietcong have all passed, the American squads retreat back to base.



Sergeant Simpson's time in Vietnam is up but under pressure from Captain Stewart, he extends his stay by two months. Shortly after, Simpson and Stewart get in an argument that Jamal tells the others is about Simpson's disapproval of all the dangerous situations in which Stewart puts Alpha Company. According to Jamal, Stewart tells Simpson if he doesn't want to fight, he shouldn't have stayed. Shortly after, Richie's squad is called upon for a dangerous patrol mission with the entire company.

After landing, the company moves through tall grass in search of the enemy. Richie is jumpy, especially after Monaco spots a symbol for a mine. Near the top of a cliff, enemy fire starts. Richie can hear bullets whizzing past his face but keeps his hand on the trigger and fights. He is shot twice – one in the leg and once in his wrist. As the company begins to retreat, someone pulls Richie by his collar back toward the helicopter site.

Analysis

Richie's first up close encounters with the enemy take place in this part of the book. Up until now, he has shot at the enemy from afar or in darkness. Richie kills a Vietcong right in front of him in broad daylight, by shooting the enemy in the face. Though his own life is spared, Richie is acutely aware of how close he came to being in the enemy's position – dead from a bullet shot at point-blank range. A few months later, Richie is shot and the very things that were likely going through the head of the Vietcong he killed go through Richie's mind. He thinks of his mother and experiences the horror of thinking he might die.

Despite forming a tough exterior, Richie's compassion also grows in this section of the book. When the village he spent time pacifying comes under attack, Richie immediately thinks of the young girl, Anh Lin, and wonders if she and her family are safe. He even goes out of his way to check on her and though it appears her mother is missing, Richie is comforted knowing Anh Lin has been spared. Richie tries to understand the people of the village, pausing to look at pictures and artifacts in the huts as he looks for the hidden enemy. He even wonders about the man he kills and questions if the death was necessary and what kind of person Vietnam has made him.

Vocabulary

interdiction, ambush, guerilla, claymore, tripwire, remote, Scope, dikes, tracer, bivouacked, mortar, punji sticks, bayonet



Chapter 16-18

Summary

Chapter 16: Richie is airlifted to a hospital. On the chopper, he sees that Brew is on a gurney next to his. Richie reaches for Brew's hand and squeezes it. Brew dies and even though a medic tries to block Richie's vision, he can hear the body bag being zipped up. Richie passes out on the chopper. When he comes back to consciousness, he is at a military hospital. He finds out he had been hit by several pieces of shrapnel, had a bullet graze his wrist and had a concussion. The good news, he is told, is that he was not hurt badly. The bad news is he will have to return to combat. Richie makes friends with another soldier being treated at the hospital named Joe Derby. Joe has serious injuries and asks Richie to read T.S. Eliot and John Steinbeck to him.

Judy Duncan, the nurse Richie met on the flight over to Vietnam, visits him. She is happy to see Richie and he has trouble getting any words out. Though she says she is doing okay, Richie can sense a sadness in her. She kisses Richie on the cheek and leaves and he hopes she really is okay. Richie gets his orders to return to his old outfit and he is terrified. He wants to go AWOL but doesn't know how to get out of Vietnam. On the plane ride back to his base, Richie meets a bunch of incoming Marines who are hungry for action. Richie realizes he has been in Vietnam for only four months.

Chapter 17: Richie returns to camp. He sees Peewee first, peeing on a tree. Peewee says he had hoped Richie was sent back home but that he is happy to see him. Next Richie sees Monaco, and Monaco gives Richie a big hug and also says he had hoped Richie was sent home. Peewee and Monaco tell Richie that Sergeant Simpson has been sent back to America and the new sergeant is old and prejudiced. Peewee says he is always the point man now and Johnson brings up the rear with the M-60, a fact that makes no sense based on the weapon. When Johnson sees Richie, he says he hopes Brew is back home and safe. Lobel tells Richie something is wrong with Johnson and to just leave it alone.

A priest, Father Santora, visits the squad. Richie first declines prayer but the squad ends up telling Santora about some of what they have been through. Santora prays with the boys and says he hopes it gives them comfort. Richie, in fact, does feel comforted.

Richie goes on guard duty with Lobel, Peewee and Sergeant Dongan – Simpson's replacement. Dongan distracts an enemy soldier by throwing a rock, and then shoots him when he is distracted. Richie realizes Dongan is smart, and knows how to stay alive. Back at camp, Lobel asks Richie and Peewee if they think there will be a race problem. Lobel says if there is, they can count on him, the Jewish kid, to have their back.

A Vietnamese woman with two small children is stopped by ARVN troops in a boat on the river near the base. The American soldiers don't like the way she is being treated



roughly, and bring her into the camp for questioning. Without a proper translator, the group doesn't get much from her and lets her go back to the boat. Just before she gets on, she hands her baby to a soldier. The baby is outfitted with a mine and explodes, killing the soldier. The woman and her other child are shot and killed.

Chapter 18: Captain Stewart sends Alpha Company out on another drill. Along with a few ARVN squads, Richie's squad is supposed to take a hill and try to draw fire from enemy believed to be camped there. Richie's squad goes four kilometers near a river and does not draw fire. The ARVN squads decide to do the same drill, and this time the Vietcong are ready. With Alpha Company bringing up the rear, the ARVN squads get trapped in an open paddy. All try to retreat, with Richie's squad going to a nearby village to await the choppers. They secure the village and kill Vietcong who are already there. Monaco and Richie see two Vietcong soldiers dragging an American soldier into bushes and they shoot them. Lieutenant Dongan is shot and loses a leg. He dies before the medevac choppers arrive and Richie gives the medics his poncho to use as a makeshift body bag.

Analysis

Richie is wounded and faces his first close brush with death in this section of the book. While Richie is thankful to be alive, he is disappointed his injuries are not bad enough to be sent home. He wishes to be in worse shape so he doesn't have to return to combat and simultaneously feels guilty for not wanting to return to his squad with his comrades. Richie's talent for using words comes into play when another soldier, who is in a worse condition than Richie, asks him to read to him. Richie's reading is therapeutic for both himself and the other soldier.

Judy Duncan, the nurse Richie met on the airplane to Vietnam, makes another appearance in the book. Just as the first time they met, Richie seems at a loss for words and Judy has a lot to say. Both are injured, however – Richie physically and Judy emotionally. Though she tells Richie she is "okay" he can see something has changed within her and she is sad. Judy's kiss on Richie's cheek is the closest thing to the love of a woman Richie has felt since being in Vietnam, and possibly his entire life, and the gesture means a lot to him.

Vocabulary

shrapnel, bugle, chaplain, AWOL, requisition, skirmish, napalm



Chapter 19-21

Summary

Chapter 19: As Richie's company awaits the medevac choppers, they pile as many dead bodies as they can find in a hut and burn it to the ground. They first strip them of their clothes and dog tags, deciding they would rather burn the bodies than let the Vietcong find them and mutilate what is left. They find a soldier who is still alive in a pile of bodies, barely holding on as blood flows from a chest wound. A fellow squad member of the injured soldier shoots him, ending his misery. When all the bodies are gathered, they use a flamethrower to light the hut.

Richie's group hears Vietnamese soldiers closing in on the village and they retreat from it. The ARVN take a shorter route through a rice paddy and dodge gunfire. Richie's squad takes a longer route along a tree line and come upon a group of enemy soldiers in an open clearing. The squad opens fire as the enemy soldier scatter. A firefight ensues. Peewee and Richie see a dead American soldier with his hands around the throat of a dead enemy soldier.

Chapter 20: The choppers arrive to pick up the surviving troops and the ARVN soldiers start to surround the Americans, hoping to push them back to get on the choppers first. Gunners in the choppers start shooting towards the ARVN to push them back and Richie and the rest of his squad are lifted to safety.

That night, Monaco awakes in the bunk and fires a shot at the door from the inside. He tells the others that he saw a Vietcong soldier coming inside. After calming Monaco down, Walowick tells Richie the same thing has happened to him before, where he thought he saw a Vietcong soldier approaching and shot at the hallucination.

The next day, the squad discovers it was Brew's 19th birthday and gets pound cake and fruit cocktail from the cook to throw a small celebration in the bunk. Lieutenant Gearhart writes three letters to his wife, and gives one to Walowick and Richie to send for him if they need to. Richie wishes he had a wife and kids missing him back home. He writes a letter to his little brother Kenny and wonders if he should tell him the truth about killing people in the war. Captain Stewart tells the squad they are going out again on a drill. Peewee openly defies Stewart though the captain says the area is secure.

Chapter 21: Richie's squad goes out, but Lieutenant Gearhart is assigned to a different group since the number of men has dwindled. Brunner is in charge of the mission and tries to act confident, even though he is nervous and unsure of himself. The squad goes up a stream toward a road where Vietcong have been reported trafficking. At first, there is no sign of any enemy soldiers. Then suddenly shots ring out from a group of tall reeds and Richie's squad retreats back toward the landing zone. Another firefight erupts on the way back to the landing zone and Richie and Peewee get on top of a ridge. They are separated from the group but can see what is going on below.



Analysis

The atrocities of war reach a climax in this part of the book. Richie sees the most casualties of his military tour and along with others, determines it is better to burn the dead Americans in a mass grave than to leave the bodies for the enemy to mutilate. In the frantic moments, the dog tags of the dead are left in the fire, leaving the men with no identities to report as casualties.

Richie and his squad mates reach the point where they can no longer rely on commanding officers to keep them safe. When the inexperienced Brunner leads a dangerous mission to find guerrillas near a river, all the men act as their own commanders. Richie and Peewee are separated from the group and forced to fight for their own lives with no other troop support.

Vocabulary

impassively, scrounge, chortled, welcher, cosmolene, giddy, AK-47, Buddha, sullen, menacingly



Chapter 22-23

Summary

Chapter 22: Richie and Peewee hold their position on the ridge as darkness falls. They cannot see anything any longer and hold hands in the dark. Peewee says he sees the enemy coming and that there are a “million” of them. Richie and Peewee find a spider hole and back into it. It is small and cramped, meant for one person but hidden from view. As daylight breaks, they hear the enemy nearby and they appear to be leaving the area. One soldier comes toward the spider hole, and puts his gun inside. Peewee and Richie grab the gun and pull the soldier in. They shoot him once in the stomach and then strangle him.

As they walk toward the landing zone, Peewee and Richie see Monaco sitting alone by a tree, his head in his hands. Peewee realizes that Monaco is bait for the choppers and enemy troops are hiding out in the bushes. Peewee and Richie hide and when the choppers arrive, they shoot toward the enemy to expose them to the choppers. The chopper gunners begin shooting at the bushes, as Monaco, Richie and Peewee run for the helicopters. Richie and Peewee are both hit but are pulled onto the chopper.

Chapter 23: Richie and Peewee are treated for their injuries at an Army hospital. Monaco is with them, though uninjured, until he can be picked up and returned to the squad. Monaco visits Richie and thanks him tearfully for saving his life. Peewee has surgery on his wounds and is still in good spirits. Both are scheduled to return to America in a few days. Richie hears there is a record keeper who will track down other military personnel if paid. Richie asks him to look up Judy Duncan and pays him ten dollars.

As Richie and Peewee wait to board the flight home, the record keeper finds Richie and tells him Judy Duncan was killed when a field hospital was attacked. An airplane of fresh recruits lands and walks past the injured men waiting to leave. On the airplane, Richie and Peewee are relieved to be leaving Vietnam. Once Peewee is sleeping, Richie allows himself to give in to sleep as well.

Analysis

The friendship between Richie and Peewee is put to the ultimate test in the final pages of the book. Relying only on each other, they escape enemy fire, spend the night unaccounted for and make it to the helicopters. They kill an enemy soldier together, with Richie shooting him and Peewee strangling him. They deduce Monaco is in trouble and end up saving three lives by their smart conclusion. They are shot at nearly exactly the same time, sent to the same hospital and ultimately put on the same airplane to fly home to America.



The bond between Peewee and Richie is unmatched by any other in the men's lives. Together they have faced death numerous times and come out on the other side by relying on each other. They are not ashamed to hold hands on the airplane ride back to America, knowing their friendship is worth more than other people's opinions.

Vocabulary

sporadic, Vatican, Nu Loc Son, basin, tux, gang-busters, amputation, frag grenade



Characters

Richie Perry

Richie Perry is a seventeen-year-old Army recruit from Harlem, New York. Richie narrates the story of the time he serves fighting in the Vietnam War and is the book's protagonist. Back in Harlem, Richie was a good basketball player. He injures his knee playing hoops at basic training and is told he will not see combat in Vietnam, though this ends up not being the case. Though his grades are good enough for college and he hopes one day to be able to write like James Baldwin, Richie joins the Army to make money to send to his single mother and younger brother, Kenny. His writing skills are noticed on his tour of duty by his commanders who ask him to write letters to family members of killed soldiers. Richie's friend Peewee also calls on him to write a letter to his girl back home in Chicago.

Richie is a black soldier and bonds quickly with the other black soldiers in his squad, though he generally gets along easily with everyone in the group. During his time in Vietnam, Richie often laments his lack of a girlfriend back home and the fact that he could die a virgin. He meets an Army nurse named Judy Duncan on the flight over to the war, and thinks of her throughout his months of fighting and is inspired to go on.

Harold "Peewee" Gates

Peewee is a young black soldier from Chicago who becomes Richie's best friend in Vietnam. Peewee arrives on the same airplane as Richie and they return to America on the same airplane after both are injured within seconds of each other. Peewee is smaller than the other guys in the squad but he stands up for himself. He is outspoken and playful with the other soldiers and his commanding officers, a fact that gets him in trouble a few times. Richie knows Peewee is harmless and a genuinely good guy deep down and the two form a deep friendship that ends up saving both of their lives.

Peewee's girlfriend marries another guy while he is in Vietnam and though he acts unscathed by it, he allows Richie see he is heartbroken. Peewee comprehends war strategy perhaps better than anyone else in the squad and seems to know what the enemy is going to do long before anyone else. Along with Richie, Peewee kills at least two enemy soldiers up close and the experience causes the two to become even more bonded.

Kenny Perry

Kenny is Richie's younger brother who is approximately thirteen years old. He is mentioned by Richie on several occasions and one of the main reasons that Richie decided to join the Army in the first place. Kenny writes a few letters to Richie, keeping him informed about things in the neighborhood. When Richie hears racial tensions are



high in the states, he writes his mother to tell Kenny to keep his smart mouth in check and stay safe. While Kenny relies on Richie as his provider and role model, Richie also relies on the thought of his little brother to keep him going in the war.

Mother

Richie's mother is a single mom who has slipped into depression and alcoholism since Richie's father abandoned the family several years earlier. She does not tell Richie she loves him before he goes to war, but attempts to mend the relationship by writing him letters and writing Peewee a letter saying she loves her son very much.

Lobel

Lobel is a Jewish soldier who is implied to be homosexual, though he never admits it. To cope with the stress of combat, Lobel often pretends he is an actor in a war movie. He explains his uncle is a Hollywood director and so he turns everything into a scene from a movie.

Monaco

Monaco is the point man of Richie's squad. He is of Italian descent and Richie admires his bold attitude in combat situations. When Richie and Peewee save Monaco's life at the end of the book, Monaco shows a moment of vulnerability by thanking them tearfully.

Captain Stewart

Captain Stewart is the commander of Alpha Company, the group where Richie serves. Captain Stewart sees the Vietnam War as his opportunity for promotion to the position of major and volunteers his troops for many dangerous missions. He earns his promotion at the price of many soldier's lives.

Sergeant Simpson

Sergeant Simpson is the leader of Richie's squad and almost finished with his time in Vietnam when Richie arrives in Vietnam. He calls new recruits "cherries" and tells them not to get him killed. Captain Stewart convinces Simpson to extend his tour by a month but then sends him back to the states when he questions Stewart's dangerous mission.



Lieutenant Ricky Carroll

Lieutenant Carroll is the leader of Richie's platoon when he arrives and is trusted by his men. He is only 23 years old but considered old by Richie and his comrades. Carroll says that he once considered studying religious theology but the war has made him a different person. He is from Kansas and his wife is pregnant with their first child, a girl. When soldiers in his platoon are killed, Carroll says a prayer for their souls, calling them "angel warriors." When Carroll is killed in combat, Richie and his platoon grieve deeply.

Lieutenant Gearhart

Lieutenant Gearhart is the inexperienced leader of Richie's platoon when Lieutenant Carroll is killed. Gearhart is chosen by Captain Stewart because of his reconnaissance training but Gearhart's practical combat knowledge is lacking.

Brew

Brewster is a religious soldier who hopes to become a clergy member after the war. He has a Bible he lets the other soldiers borrow. Brewster is shot in combat and dies on the medevac chopper next to Richie.

Corporal Brunner

Brunner is described as a bully who has a thick neck. He is rude to his squad mates but sucks up to his commanding officers. Richie says Brunner has "a chip on his shoulder."

Sergeant Dongan

Dongan is an older soldier who also fought in the Korean War. He has racist tendencies, always putting black soldiers in the most dangerous spots. He is from Richmond, Indiana and has a Southern accent. He dies in combat and his leg is separated from his body.

Judy Duncan

Judy is an Army nurse who Richie meets on the airplane to Vietnam. She is talkative and confident, and Richie is unsure how to act around her. Judy is from Irving, Texas and says when she was a kid, she wanted to be a garbage man or a movie star. Though Richie spends a small amount of time with Judy, he thinks of her often in combat. He pays a record keeper to look up Judy's whereabouts before Richie heads back to the U.S. and discovers she died working in a field hospital.



Earlene

Earlene is Peewee's girlfriend from back home who married another man while Peewee is away. She writes a letter to Richie saying that she loves Peewee but couldn't wait.

Jamal

Jamal is a medic who spends a lot of time with Richie's platoon. He is straightforward and shows Richie copies of official reports that have inaccurate enemy body counts. Jamal doesn't do well on the battle field, and his nerves are very unsteady.

Jenkins

Jenkins is a squad member of Richie's who arrives on the same airplane. From the start, Jenkins is terrified of dying, telling Richie he doesn't think he will make it out of Vietnam alive. Jenkins father is a colonel who hopes a tour of duty in Vietnam will get his son into Officers Candidate School. He is killed after stepping on a booby trap outside the squad base.

Johnson

Johnson is a large, black soldier who is physically strong and shows the tendency toward good leadership. Richie describes him as being "as black as a human being could get." Johnson is from Savannah, Georgia and handles the M-60 in the squad. Despite his size, he avoids physical altercations in most cases and shows maturity.

Johnny Robinson

Richie's little brother Kenny writes a letter saying that Johnny Robinson, a boy from Richie's neighborhood, is killed in Vietnam. Richie is surprised Johnny was in Vietnam because he always thought he was much younger.

Walowick

Walowick is a soldier of Polish descent in Richie's squad. When he first arrives, he makes racist comments but as he grows closer to his squad mates, especially Richie, the prejudices seem to fade away.

Mrs. Liebow

Richie mentions his English teacher from Stuyvesant High School. Richie talks to her about his tendency to feel unattached at times when playing basketball and she says he

just needs to get right in there and play. She tells him not giving in is what separates humans from heroes.

Scotty

Scotty is a machine gun operator with Charlie Company who works alongside Richie. They are together when they discover they have been part of friendly fire. Scotty is from Tacoma, Washington, and is 6-foot-five.

Joe Derby

Richie meets Joe Derby in the military hospital. Joe's injuries are much worse than Richie's and they bond while Richie reads him books by T.S. Eliot and John Steinbeck.



Objects/Places

Vietnam

Richie is sent to Vietnam to fight for the U.S. Army in 1967. He describes it as a rainy, hot jungle with rivers and rice paddies.

Harlem, New York

Richie grew up in Harlem and his brother and mother still live there. Richie graduated from Stuyvesant High School and played in neighborhood basketball games. He describes witnessing a drive-by shooting at the age of fifteen and often worries his brother Kenny is going to get hurt.

Rain

The heavy rain in Vietnam makes Richie simultaneously happy and horrified. He often hopes for rain when he thinks the enemy may be near, to hinder visibility in a firefight, but then he curses the rain when it falls and he is trying to make it to safety.

Guns

The young men of Richie's squad are issued guns right when they arrive. Richie, Jenkins and Peewee receive M-16s and Johnson gets an M-60. Peewee asks for a pistol as well, but Richie declines one because he does not want to be close enough to the enemy to have to use it. The young men become so accustomed to carrying guns that firing them is like second nature.

Richie's letters

Richie's letters to his mother and brother Kenny play an integral part in understanding his family dynamic. Richie often leaves the truth out of his letters, in order to protect his family from knowing the true horrors of war. Richie is also called upon to write letters to family members of deceased soldiers and even Peewee asks him to write a letter to his ex-girlfriend.

Richie's Knee

Richie injures his knee in a basketball game at Fort Devens before he is called to go to Vietnam. He believes his knee injury will keep him from seeing any combat, but his



commanders in Vietnam don't seem to care he has been declared medically unable to fight.

Prayer

Richie learns to pray during trying moments in Vietnam. He hopes that God does not find him hypocritical and is often not sure how to even form a prayer. He learns the words to the Lord's Prayer and Psalm 23 and repeats portions in his head when he is scared.

Willy Peter (white phosphorous)

Willy Peter is a substance used during the Vietnam War during combat. It was housed in artillery shells and ate through skin, making it very painful for the enemy. The shells also acted as fragmentation explosives. Richie shudders every time Willy Peter is used because he knows how very cruel a weapon it is.

Mosquitoes

The mosquitoes in Vietnam come in swarms and leave the American soldiers with bites and welts all over their bodies. Richie comments American mosquitoes don't seem to like black people but that Vietnamese mosquitoes do not discriminate.

Basketball

Richie played basketball expertly back in America, first with a neighborhood team called the Monarchs and then during military training. Richie likes the feeling he gets when he is in the heat of playing basketball and compares it to the feelings he has during combat.

War Movies

Lobel often compares his military service in Vietnam to scenes from war movies. He says if Hollywood would just give the Vietnamese people bit parts in movies, all the conflict would be resolved. He often gives Richie roles in his movie scenes and uses it as a defense mechanism to avoid his true fear about the war.



Themes

Reality of War

Richie and the other Army troops that are new to Vietnam have a distorted view of what to expect. They all tell each other that the fighting is over anyway and that none of them is going to be harmed. Jenkins talks about his tour in Vietnam as being simply a stepping stone to Officers Candidate School when he returns to the U.S., as if it is the same as taking a college class for credit toward a degree. Judy Duncan says that she figures anything she encounters after being a nurse in Vietnam will look good. Both Jenkins and Judy die within a month of landing in Vietnam, neither able to seek the follow up they believed would come after their service. The optimism shared by Jenkins, Judy and the other new troops is typical of the misinformed American public in 1968, as well as representing the idea that the reality of war cannot truly be understood until it is experienced.

Richie's eyes are opened almost immediately to the reality of the war in Vietnam, and to the reality of his own life. For some time, Richie has believed he will not see any combat action because of a knee injury. Even after he is shipped to Vietnam and sent deep into the jungle, Richie believes his medical papers will arrive any day and free him from being in harm's way. As one commanding officer passes along Richie's request for medical immunity to the next commanding officer, it becomes clear Richie's knee is not a priority and it is too late for him to escape the action. The death of Jenkins by a booby trap immediately alerts Richie to his own fragility and the true extent of the danger of his location.

Power of Friendship

The book explores the powerful role that camaraderie plays in combat. The men of Richie's squad come from different places and varied backgrounds, with an added element of racial tension. These boundaries would play a larger role in regular American society, but in Vietnam they seem trivial. All that matters is getting out of Vietnam, and back to the U.S., alive -- as a group.

The friendship between Richie and Peewee is especially strong and ends up saving the lives of both young men. Though Peewee puts on a show that nothing bothers him to everyone else, he allows Richie to see his vulnerable moments, like when he asks Richie to write a letter to his ex-girlfriend. Peewee feels a duty to protect Richie, who is less confident on the battlefield, and often takes the lead when their lives are in danger. Peewee also protects Richie emotionally, downplaying his injuries so Richie will not worry. The two form a "spit pact" early on in their tour of duty, and hold hands a few times on the battlefield when there is no other way to comfort each other. After all that the young men go through together, they are unashamed to hold hands on the airplane ride back to America.



Disconnect Between Battle Field and “Real World”

The gap in understanding between American civilians on home soil and American soldiers in Vietnam is emphasized in the book. Richie and his squad mates' perception of what the war will be like in Vietnam, based on what they have read in newspapers and seen on television, is vastly different from the real Vietnam war zone. In media, the war appears to be a black and white issue with Americans playing the “heroes.” Richie soon discovers that enemy and friendly fire overlap and that he is not exactly sure why he is fighting.

The letters written between family members and the soldiers in Richie's squad emphasize the disconnection between their lives back home and their lives on the battle field. Richie finds it strange that his mother writes him letters about happenings in the neighborhood but then realizes she has no concept of what he is going through. The letter Lieutenant Carroll has written to his wife says nothing about his life in Vietnam, but only talks about the book store the couple plans to open and what windows to install in their house. Since there is no way to describe Vietnam in words, the soldiers converse with people “back home” talking about experiences there.



Style

Point of View

The book is written from the first-person point of view of Richie Perry, a seventeen-year-old soldier in the Army sent to Vietnam in 1967. Richie often narrates in a free flow of ideas style, with his words representing his feelings at the moment he feels them. We learn more about the personalities of other characters and their motivations through the way Richie describes them. Though his narration could be viewed as one-sided, Richie often keeps his own opinion out of the story and merely tells the story of what is happening.

The words of the other characters are shown best through the letters they write. Though Richie gives readers the impression his mother does not care much about him, the letter she writes to Peewee tells a very different tale – to the surprise of even Richie. It is clear Lieutenant Gearhart blames himself for Brew's death in the letter that he writes to Brew's family, though he never actually says it to the other soldiers.

Setting

The main action of the book is set in Vietnam, specifically the area of Chu Lai in South Vietnam. Richie's squad spends time on patrol and doing pacification missions in the villages near the American base. He is sent to two military hospitals after being injured where he spends several weeks altogether. On patrol, Richie describes jungle surroundings, rice paddies, and torrential rain as being common.

Richie flashes back to his life in Harlem, New York throughout the book. He attended Stuyvesant High School and played in neighborhood basketball games. Though Richie never encounters personal violence, the streets of Harlem are dangerous in some places due to gang violence. Richie dreams of making it back home, though he knows it will never hold the same meaning after his time in the war.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in relatively simple language that is easy enough for young readers to comprehend. Richie's language skills are more heightened than his peers but he does not let the story get lost in steep writing and vocabulary. He explains war things, such as white phosphorous and the different types of guns, in enough detail so readers who are unfamiliar with battle and the Vietnam War are able to follow the technicalities. For many young readers, it is the first time they are learning about the conflict in Vietnam and seeing it through the eyes of inexperienced Richie Perry aids in comprehension.



The simplicity of a young man's view of the Vietnam War makes the book powerful. Like many youths of his generation, Richie questions the intention of the conflict but feels a responsibility to his squad and country to see his tasks through to completion. His internal struggle with right and wrong are easily understood by readers, especially young adult readers, because his feelings are common in the pre-adult crowd. Older readers sense the heartbreak in the innocence lost to Richie and his peers.

Structure

The book is written in 23 untitled chapters of varying length. Each chapter covers a relatively close period of time, with flashbacks incorporated throughout. Some chapters start exactly where the previous chapter left off and others skip ahead several days or weeks. The chapters cover approximately six months of Richie's tour of duty in Vietnam in 1967 and 1968.

The main plot of the story is Richie's time of service in Vietnam. His arrival, time in combat and fight for life makes up the main action of the book, and his emotional changes accompany the action. Several subplots intersect with Richie's life, including Peewee's breakup with his girlfriend, the racial tension in the squad and the deaths of Lieutenant Carroll. The politics of the Vietnam War is a subplot all in itself.



Quotes

Back home I thought mosquitoes never bit black people. Not as much as they bit white people, anyway. Maybe Vietnamese mosquitoes just bit blacks and whites and didn't bite Asians. (Chapter 2)

Stay away from dope. There's only two kinds of people in Nam. People who are alert twenty-four hours a day, and people who are dead. (Chapter 2)

Jenkins had been walking with me and talking with me only hours before. Seeing him lying there like that, his mouth and eyes open, had grabbed something inside my chest and twisted it hard. (Chapter 4)

I thought of saying a prayer, but I couldn't think of one. I didn't know one prayer. Under my breath I apologized to God. (Chapter 5)

They hadn't died facing the enemy. They just died because somebody else was scared, maybe careless. They died because they were in Nam, where being scared made you do things you would regret later. We were killing our brothers, ourselves. (Chapter 8)

Brew's praying bothered me. It wasn't that I minded him being religious, it was just that I didn't want him being closer to God than I was. (Chapter 9)

Lieutenant Carroll's death was close. It hung around our shoulders and filled the spaces between us. Lieutenant Carroll had sat with us, had been afraid with us, had worried about us. Now he was dead. (Chapter 10)

We spent another day lying around. It seemed to be what the war was about. Hours of boredom, seconds of terror. (Chapter 11)

Sometimes standing alone seemed to be the hardest thing in the world to do, even when being in the crowd meant you could be killed. (Chapter 12)

It was all part of Nam. Some parts you could laugh at, like getting hit in the ass. Other parts, like the kid blowing up, you tried to shut out of your mind. (Chapter 18)

We're all dead over here, Monaco... We're all dead and just hoping that we come back to life when we get into the World again. (Chapter 23)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Richie Perry? Where is he from? Why did he decide to join the Army? What author does Richie say he wants to learn to write like? Explain the relationship that Richie has with his mother? Who is his little brother? Explain the mutually dependent relationship that Richie and his little brother share. Who does Richie write letters to? Describe the internal struggle Richie has with fighting in the Vietnam War.

Topic 2

Who is Peewee Gates? What is Peewee's real first name? Where is Peewee from? What happens with Peewee's girlfriend, Earlene? Describe Peewee's personality. What does Peewee pull out from under his pillow when a bigger soldier confronts him? What injuries does Peewee suffer in Vietnam? What does Peewee say he wants to do when he gets back to America? Describe the friendship between Richie and Peewee.

Topic 3

Who is Monaco? Describe the attitude of Corporal Brunner. What heritage is Walowick? How does Walowick's attitude change toward the black soldiers in his squad over time? Who is Lobel? What slur is Lobel often called? Why does Lobel know so much about the movie industry? Who is Jenkins? How does Jenkins die? Who is Johnson? What kind of gun does Johnson operate? Who is Jamal?

Topic 4

Describe the leadership style of Lieutenant Carroll. How old is Carroll? In a letter to his wife, what does Carroll talk about? Who takes over when Carroll is killed in combat? What part of combat is Lieutenant Gearhart specially trained in? Why don't the soldiers trust Captain Stewart? What talent of Richie's catches Captain Stewart's attention? Who is Sergeant Simpson? Why does Simpson agree to stay in Vietnam, even when his tour of duty time is up?

Topic 5

Who is Judy Duncan? What job does Judy say she wanted to have when she was a kid? What was her "backup" plan? Do you think that Richie is attracted to Judy? Why or why not? How has Judy changed when she visits Richie at the hospital? How is Judy killed, and how does Richie find out about it?



Topic 6

What is a pacification mission? Describe what Richie and his squad mates actually do on their pacification missions. Name the little girl they meet on a pacification mission. What happens to the village that Richie's squad visits? How does visiting the village affect Richie's view of the war? How does Richie feel about the civilians who embark on a pacification mission? Who are the "bad guys" in the war, and what group are the Americans trying to protect?

Topic 7

Describe the role of the rain in the book. At what moments does Richie welcome the rain? When does he despise the rain? What is a rice paddy? Describe the ARVN troops. Who are the NVA? Describe the circumstances that lead Richie to kill an enemy soldier up close. Where does Richie believe his squad is going to be sent when he first arrives in Vietnam? How are the young men in Richie's squad different from others their age in America?