If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home Study Guide

If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home by Tim O'Brien

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

"If I Die in a Combat Zone" is a personal memoir. In twenty-three brief chapters, Tim O'Brien recounts his experience as a young man drafted into military service during the Vietnam War. With thoughtfulness and insight, he illustrates his inner turmoil over his opposition to the war, and his struggle to decide whether or not to dodge the draft or to flee basic training. With the vulgar humor of a foot soldier, O'Brien brings to life the foxholes and night marches through the villages and minefields of Vietnam. He bares his soul in an examination of courage, justice, and the brutal behavior of infantrymen in the Vietnam War.

The memoir briefly recounts Tim O'Brien's childhood and education. This serves to help the reader understand what O'Brien stands to lose if he does not report for duty as called for by his country. The personal history also serves as a stark juxtaposition to the harshness of basic training and advanced infantry school where O'Brien is forced from the comfort of his hometown into military fatigues and a multiple occupancy barracks.

In advanced infantry training, O'Brien makes one last effort to seek counsel for his opposition to the Vietnam War. When he finds no guidance, he makes another effort to desert military training. O'Brien makes it to Seattle, but cannot bring himself to get on the bus and cross the border into Canada. Instead, several weeks later and despite his personal opposition, he lands in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam.

In Vietnam, O'Brien is assigned as a radio operator in Alpha Company. He is initiated into the life of a soldier in a combat zone. It is a rough and violent life. O'Brien survives many battles by burying himself in the mud. He watches the forest. He witnesses atrocities committed upon the Vietnamese. He sees many friends die. And he discovers a hero in his company commander, Captain Johansen. O'Brien takes the reader through the villages and battles of Alpha Company in each part of Vietnam, from the Batangan Peninsula to the My Lai.

The memoir closes with O'Brien safely ensconced in a non-combat position at a base camp. At this base camp, O'Brien finally manages to escape the most serious horrors of war, except introspection. Self-examination, O'Brien learns, can be as painful as combat. When O'Brien finally makes the return trip home to the plains of Minnesota, he is unable to rejoice. He left Minnesota as a college boy, but he returns as a man, irreparably affected by the Vietnam War.

Chapter 1, Days

Chapter 1, Days Summary and Analysis

In the jungles of Vietnam, the days of marching and sweeping villages are long and tedious for the men in O'Brien's company, Alpha Company. It is explained that marching in military lingo is "humping" and to march with items is to "hump" it, for example, a pack or military supplies. Sometimes the march is simply referred to as the "hump". O'Brien marches slowly behind his buddy Barney, a spry soldier who maintains a sense of humor under fire, humping along the trail cracking jokes. O'Brien's company fights fatigue and boredom on their marches as often as they fight Charlie. It is explained that Charlie is the Viet Cong, the North Vietnamese insurgents that the soldiers are constantly searching villages to eliminate. The search for Charlie leads to intermittent skirmishes that are over quickly. These long marches and rare encounters with Charlie are so routine for the young soldiers that they often daydream on the march or light cigarettes when they shouldn't, as this alerts the enemy to their location. The reader learns that the most frightening mission for soldiers is clearing underground tunnels. The job of going down into the tunnels scares every soldier.

In this chapter, when Alpha Company discovers tunnels in a village, they decide to throw two rounds of grenades into the tunnels instead of sending down soldiers. This provokes a few Viet Cong hiding in the jungle nearby to open fire on the company, and then swiftly disappear into the jungle. O'Brien highlights the fear and frustration of the young soldiers during this firefight. The soldiers, nearly undone by exhaustion and frayed nerves, spray bullets from M16s, M60s, and M70s haphazardly into the bush. They fire incessantly, without direction, directly over the heads of their fellow soldiers. This is the familiar pattern of the days and nights of marching. When the sun rises, the soldiers have a few moments of normalcy. They heat up canned food rations and clean up before another day of marching, tunnels, and firefights. Opening with this scene in Vietnam introduces the reader to O'Brien as a narrator, as well as introducing the storyline. The style and tone of the narrative is the realistic and vulgar humor of a foot soldier; however, O'Brien is a foot soldier with a college education.

Chapter 2, Pro Patria

Chapter 2, Pro Patria Summary and Analysis

In this chapter the narrative changes to visit O'Brien's past and the circumstances that lead to his service in the Army. A child of WWII veterans born during the baby boom, O'Brien grows to manhood on the plains of southern Minnesota. Through the stories told by the town's old men at gatherings or on long afternoons, the legacies of WWII and the Korean War form a backdrop to his upbringing

Nevertheless, O'Brien's childhood and adolescence is full of the happiness of small town Mid-western life. He ice skates in the winter, plays baseball in the summer, obeys his aging teachers, and longs for pretty girls in middle school. In high school, between pep rallies, dances, dates at drive-in movie theaters, and the A&W Root Beer Stand, O'Brien takes up reading Plato. He develops an interest in politics. He attends a few local political meetings and lingers on nocturnal walks to contemplate timeless questions, those such as the existence of God and the meaning of life. This chapter illustrates the contrast between O'Brien's childhood and the rude awakening that awaits him as a young adult. This chapter also gives the reader an insight for O'Brien's future turmoil over the decision to go to Vietnam, and what he is afraid to lose.

Chapter 3, Beginning

Chapter 3, Beginning Summary and Analysis

In the summer of 1968, O'Brien is no longer an innocent and thoughtful young boy on the prairie. Lyndon B. Johnson is forgotten, Robert Kennedy is dead, and Richard Nixon is a scandal. In the midst of such change, O'Brien receives an induction notice from the draft board to report for basic training at the end of the summer. A recent college graduate, he spends his summer in debate and introspection with college friends and the townsfolk he grew up with. During this last period of calm before he is changed forever by the brutality of war, O'Brien drinks beer with the farm kids, plays pool and golf, takes long late-night rides around Lake Okabena where he once played "Japs and Krauts", and thinks deeply about the right and wrong aspects of the Vietnam War, the right of self-determination, the moral conscience and the state, God, and love.

Throughout the summer he struggles with a moral dilemma. He has decided the war is wrong, he argues for dodging the draft, yet he is faced with his family, his town, and the post-WWII life on the prairie that educated him to love America and do his duty when called. His inner struggle is profound. Shortly before he reports for basic training, he hides in the basement to cover pieces of cardboard in the blood red ink of anti war slogans. His family, though careful of his sentiments, prepares his satchel and organizes a farewell dinner. His father, a WWII veteran, makes the phone calls and prepares his induction papers.

On August 13, 1968, his father drops him at the bus depot. The bus travels through other small prairie towns, picking up young men. It is the last bus ride of freedom—loud, raucous, and doused with beer. The following day, however, everyone is sober, shaven, and shorn after raising their hands and reciting an oath. At the end of this chapter, O'Brien breaks up the narrative flow with a post-war commentary on the Vietnam War. He explains that even as he writes the memoir years after the war, he still has not reconciled his moral struggle with the Vietnam War. He further admits that a foot soldier can not teach important lessons about war simply for having fought in one, all he can do is tell war stories after he returns.

Chapter 4, Nights

Chapter 4, Nights Summary and Analysis

O'Brien continues with the narrative of Alpha Company. Nighttime follows a routine much like the endless days of marching; however, the nights are filled with more potential danger. On a typical night, the shouts of a lieutenant warning Alpha Company of incoming explosive ordinance propels the soldiers into the nearest foxhole. Sometimes, the attack is nothing more than the antics of bored soldiers tossing their own grenades about and suffering minor injuries by their own shrapnel. This is exactly what takes place in this chapter. That this potentially fatal incident is merely laughed off by all is an indicator of how war-weary the men are. They are no longer bothered by minor shrapnel injuries, even if they are self-induced, and even if it could have cost a man a limb or life. O'Brien hints that the soldiers may be a bit insane, perhaps mentally compromised.

As the soldiers hump along the trails searching for a place to dig their foxholes for the evening, they carry the war on their shoulders along with the humidity, the rain, and their packs. The soldiers scan everything as they walk, stepping carefully through potential minefields and rice paddies. They search for anything that betrays a potential explosion, like a stray bit of cloth out of place, a piece of thread, or a wire. The need to be alert as well as the endless marching along induces a lethargy that the soldiers constantly battle. To fight exhaustion and daydreams as they are marching, they must tape their eyes open in order to watch for every potential threat. Once the company rests in freshly dug foxholes, they stare into the jungle. At night the men fear the jungle. The jungle seems to move as they stare into the darkness. This increases the fear and paranoia that Charlie stares at them just waiting to kill them in their sleep.

For distraction, the soldiers break out a piece of new equipment: a Starlight scope one soldier named Barney has humped along the trail in his pack. The Starlight scope is early night vision technology. With this night scope the men peer into the darkness of the jungle. The green and black of the jungle bears no human form, no Viet Cong hiding in ambush. The soldiers calm down. Taking turns peering through the night scope, the men watch the living jungle and imagine Charlie dancing among the greenery, having fun in the inky night.

Chapter 5, Under the Mountain

Chapter 5, Under the Mountain Summary and Analysis

The narrative reverses again in this chapter as O'Brien recounts the experience of basic training at Ft. Lewis, in Washington. Sixty miles from the white-topped dome of Mount Rainier, one hundred young men accompany O'Brien in submission to shaven heads, uniforms, and drill sergeants. Basic training is difficult for O'Brien. He perceives himself as a misplaced intellectual in the midst of savages. O'Brien goes through the motions of training, but turns inward. He looks with disdain on those that flourish in the caustic atmosphere of basic training. He rebels against the notion that ferocity in battle is what makes a man out of a boy. O'Brien is lonely and thinks of deserting.

He finds a friend in a fellow soldier, Erik, who shares his point of view on the Vietnam War and reads T. E Lawrence as intensely as O'Brien reads Plato. They form a two-man alliance to survive basic training. They stand apart from the recruits because they question the war, life, God, and the brutality of basic training. They perform their training tasks with smug arrogance, convinced that they are not merely part of the herd of recruits to be programmed for battle like robots. Erik demands a meeting with the company drill sergeant to discuss his opposition to the Vietnam War. The drill sergeant Blyton calls him a coward and a pansy, and then sends him back to the barracks.

This incident and the close friendship between Erik and O'Brien catch the attention of the drill sergeant Blyton. O'Brien and Erik are forced to put more effort into soldiering through training to avoid direct conflict with Blyton. They find a log behind the barracks to sit on and talk privately while they polish their boots, clean their M14s, and discuss poetry and literature. They abhor one soldier in particular; a recruit who began basic training at the same time yet rises to the status of squad leader. This squad leader enjoys his new power. The squad leader makes the other soldiers buff and wax the floor. Under the glare of fluorescent lights on dark wet mornings at three am, the squad leader rousts the recruits from their racks to scrub the urinals and climb into the rafters to dust the wooden beams. Yanked out of bed every morning by the squad leader, and humiliated by drill sergeant Blyton every day, the soldiers march through basic training chanting cadences, learning to shoot on the quick kill range, and how to gut a man with a bayonet.

When basic training ends, each soldier is given an assignment. Erik signed on for two years to have a non-combat job in the rear. The rear is the support location for the war, far away from the front lines or combat duty. O'Brien did not sign up for two years in the hopes that the Army would realize the he would be more useful in an office than in combat. This is not the case, and O'Brien stays on at Ft. Lewis for Advanced Infantry Training while Erik leaves for Vietnam. This chapter highlights the caustic nature of military training and service, and the problem of assimilation for soldiers like the sensitive O'Brien and Erik, who are intellectual and consumed by a moral struggle. The hierarchy and mission of the military during wartime is not conducive to analytical

thought or moral conundrums. This plagues O'Brien throughout his experience in Vietnam, and fuels his desire to desert.

Chapter 6, Escape

Chapter 6, Escape Summary and Analysis

In Advanced Infantry Training, O'Brien learns to more ways to kill. The soldiers in infantry training are informed upon arrival that they are destined for the foxholes of Vietnam, without exception. This motivates O'Brien to use his precious little free time to go to the library to research airfares and the routes to Sweden. He then writes to his parents, inventing an excuse for them to send his passport and shot record.

While he waits and trains during the wet cold winter of Ft. Lewis, Washington, O'Brien requests a meeting with the battalion commander, yet military hierarchy deems that before a soldier can meet with the battalion commander he must first visit the Chaplain, a military officer who is also a religious officiant and counselor. In a discussion with the Chaplain, O'Brien states his opposition to the Vietnam War, not directly, but philosophically, in an appeal to the Chaplain's higher sense of reasoning and intellect. However, the Chaplain disappoints O'Brien. The Chaplain is more a military officer than a studious religious professional. The Chaplain curses frequently and points out that by questioning the war and expressing his opposition, O'Brien is somehow a traitor to his country. The Chaplain is, however, impressed with O'Brien's sincerity and intellect. He makes an appointment with the battalion commander as O'Brien requested.

The meeting with the battalion commander is brief. He believes the young O'Brien is merely afraid of dying. The battalion commander is more interested in the dandruff on O'Brien's shoulder than the moral struggle for which O'Brien seeks guidance. After two failed attempts to work through the military hierarchy for guidance and counsel, O'Brien continues his planning to desert to Sweden. He writes letters to his friends and family to explain why needs to flee. During his brief Christmas break, he executes his plan to desert infantry training. He is ill with bronchitis and wrestles with his decision. He wanders around Seattle, sick and restless, for one last day to think over his plans. At dawn, he burns the letters to his family and his carefully researched plans.

The specter of exile and the judgment of friends and family back home on the plains simply overwhelmed his desire to flee; it overwhelmed his opposition to the war. He returns to the barracks. The aborted attempt to desert captures the major theme of this memoir. O'Brien is not afraid of Vietnam, nor is he afraid of dying. He is more afraid of his inability to be courageous. He realizes he is not courageous enough to stand up for his beliefs and refuse military service. He is not brave enough to deal with the exile, with the loss of love from and respect for his family and friends that might be a consequence of his actions.

Chapter 7, Arrival

Chapter 7, Arrival Summary and Analysis

As the plane glides through mist and mountains to land in Cam Ranh Bay, Vietnam, O'Brien stares out the window and wonders which patch of rainforest may hold his death. Upon landing, he is transported to another base, the Combat Center, in Chu Lai. The Combat Center in Chu Lai encapsulates the unusual and often bizarre aspects of Vietnam. The soldiers learn how to walk through minefields and pitch hand grenades in a war zone. For entertainment, however, this war zone is equipped with beaches, bars, and a resort-like atmosphere complete with local girls selling cokes—girls with "barely concealed anger" in their eyes.

O'Brien is assigned to Alpha Company, at a base camp named LZ Gator. O'Brien picks up his gear and waits for Alpha Company to return from a mission. When Alpha Company returns, they burst out of the jungle like mad men. They seem to have lost all manners, all sense of proper human interpersonal communication. They are crude, they curse wildly, get drunk, look for prostitutes, and do drugs. They walk around half undressed and blunder through a nighttime attack on LZ Gator that finds O'Brien hiding behind the only solid metal thing he can find—beer kegs. For the battle-hardened men of Alpha Company, the nighttime attack is nothing more than a spectacle and they laugh, in their underwear, at incoming mortars. Alternating between laziness and over-exuberance, they aim their weapons into the rice paddies, ignoring the orders of their officers.

As O'Brien helps gather the bodies of dead Viet Cong and a few GIs the next day, the other soldiers tell him the attack was tame, just a taste, nothing like real combat. The use of language is rough and full of harsh realism in this chapter, as O'Brien gets deeper into the narrative. He uses the language of a military insider. The reader, though unfamiliar with the trappings of soldiers and war, is able to follow due to the deft narrative skills of the author. The tone remains this way throughout the memoir.

Chapter 8, Alpha Company

Chapter 8, Alpha Company Summary and Analysis

O'Brien's introduction to life with Alpha Company is an abrupt transition to the vulgarities of daily life in Vietnam. The first strange days are like a weird tropical vacation in a war zone. Alpha Company moves along the beaches, followed by a procession of Vietnamese prostitutes. Little boys follow along to clean weapons and give back rubs. Everywhere the men of Alpha Company go, the Vietnamese people serve the Americans in any way possible for money.

O'Brien explains more of the military language he incorporates into his narrative. There are also abrupt transitions between a limited first person and the second person point of view. Though the transition is abrupt, the use of the second person point of view does pull the reader deeper into the narrative. The reader learns that a hand grenade is a "frag", that someone who has only five or six months left in Vietnam is getting "short", and that in Alpha Company you don't merely kill people, you "waste them", and when you die you "get wasted". Everyone is addressed by a nickname.

One enigmatic officer addressed as Mad Mark makes an impression on O'Brien. Mad Mark is a professional soldier, and he has the qualities that O'Brien does not: confidence, courage, agility, and stealth. Mad Mark fearlessly approaches missions, particularly night missions, although O'Brien is both repulsed and fascinated by Mad Mark's effortless ferocity. On one night mission, Mad Mark returns with an ear he sliced off of a Viet Cong, and brings it back to LZ Gator to show around as a trophy. Afterwards, Mad Mark calls air strikes to burn the village of Tri Binh 4, where the dead and earless Viet Cong lay in a field. The village burns through the night and the smoke troubles O'Brien because he can't get the image of the ear and the wasted village out of his mind.

Chapter 9, Ambush

Chapter 9, Ambush Summary and Analysis

The calm days of adapting to Vietnam come to an end as O'Brien experiences real combat on a night mission. On this march the soldiers combat fatigue as they try to stay alert. Mad Mark leads the men. They bungle along loudly as the Claymore mines and hand grenades make a great deal of noise. As the men of Alpha Company march along the trail, the forest seems to come alive for O'Brien. The trees and vines take on mythical qualities as frightening as the Viet Cong they hunt. The forest is misty, scary, and dark enough to devour entire platoons. O'Brien does not want to be swallowed whole by Vietnam. The forests are symbolic of his fear.

He watches the man in front of him on the trail because his life depends on not getting lost. The jungle is so overwhelming that O'Brien can't sleep, even when he trades off watch with another soldier. He feels the jungle watching the platoons of loud and cumbersome American troops. He fears being bivouacked on a trail open to any evil the jungle might unleash. To pass the time on watch, O'Brien dreams of girls, what he will do when he leaves Vietnam, the books he will write in the style of Hemingway, and the travels he will plan. He remembers a summer he spent studying in Prague where he had a long conversation about the Vietnam War with a Vietnamese student who was also a Viet Cong officer. He hoped the student was not in the group of Charlie they were preparing to ambush.

Halfway through this chapter, O'Brien abruptly changes the timeline and jumps to the memories of another ambush led by the commander of Alpha Company, Captain Johansen. On this ambush, in the vicinity of the My Lai, O'Brien sees for the first time the enemy alive—as creeping silhouettes near a rice paddy. O'Brien neither hates the men nor wants them dead but he shoots when Captain Johansen gives the order. He simply does what a soldier is trained to do. An explosion kills two soldiers from Alpha Company during a sweep of the village. O'Brien helps gather the remains of the soldiers, but refuses to look at the corpse of the Viet Cong as Captain Johansen and the other soldiers discuss the ambush afterwards.

In this chapter, O'Brien becomes a soldier. Though he refuses to look at the bodies, he has engaged in combat. He may have killed one of the enemy Viet Cong; he fears that he killed the same student he bonded with in Prague. He is now a genuine participant in the Vietnam War, even though he resists by not looking at the corpse. The juxtaposition of the two scenes also serves to set up a comparison between Mad Mark and Captain Johansen as leaders, soldiers, and men that O'Brien will explore later in the memoir.

Chapter 10, The Man at the Well

Chapter 10, The Man at the Well Summary and Analysis

This chapter is the shortest in this memoir, merely a scene. Alpha Company comes upon a small village where an elderly blind Vietnamese farmer sits beside a well. The old man greets the soldiers, telling them again and again, "good water for good GIs". The old man ingratiates himself with the soldiers, laughs with them, and helps them to bathe, as if his survival depends on it. Even the children give back rubs and clean their weapons. But as the old man pours buckets of water over each man, a pot-bellied and bellicose soldier throws a carton of milk rations at the blind man's face.

After a momentary daze, the blind man regains his composure, smiles, and continues to pull water from the well to bathe the soldiers. Through allegorical narration, O'Brien conveys the message that the only way the Vietnamese can survive contact with American soldiers is by flattery and servitude, yet even that is not enough to spare them humiliation or assault.

Chapter 11, Assault

Chapter 11, Assault Summary and Analysis

In the mind-numbing heat of the Batangan Peninsula, the soldiers march in the mornings and spend the afternoons in shady retreat. They are careless with their equipment, their safety, and are concerned only with finding shelter from the relentless sun. O'Brien tries to pass the time playing chess with Captain Johansen. O'Brien carries and operates the radio and is therefore always near the Captain. Johansen deftly avoids deep conversation on the morality of the war. His responses are honest, but they are the brief responses of a career soldier. The other soldiers of Alpha Company talk of nothing more than girls back home, prostitutes, or where to go on R&R.

O'Brien receives a letter from Erik, who is stationed in Long Binh as a transportation clerk. The letter from Erik provides O'Brien with his only intellectual connection. The isolation of platoons and companies in Vietnam makes for a lonely atmosphere. Even as the soldiers of Alpha Company bond as buddies in war, their friendships are deep only in the foxhole; they remain somewhat shallow in reality, because constant death impedes any real human connection.

As time passes, Alpha Company grapples with rumors that they will be transferred somewhere really dangerous, like Pinkville. Pinkville is the My Lai area, dangerous due to the toughness of the Viet Cong forty-eighth battalion. After a short break in the rear at Chu Lai, Alpha Company is transferred to Pinkville. They storm the village of My Khe, where O'Brien loses a buddy. The days that follow bring one village assault after another.

Chapter 12, Mori

Chapter 12, Mori Summary and Analysis

Alpha Company comes across an injured Viet Cong female soldier. She is shot through the groin and writhing in pain as she bleeds to death. A few soldiers make lewd comments that because she is shot through the groin she is useless to them. The soldier who shot her laments having shot a woman. Other soldiers, including the medic, attempt to care for her. They give her some Kool-Aid from a canteen. They admire her beauty and fan her to chase the flies away. They remark at how calmly she dies, without the usual female hysterics.

This chapter illustrates the diversity of character among the soldiers in Vietnam. Some soldiers become vulgar and vicious, while others retain their humanity and the ability to feel ashamed for shooting a woman, even though she was an enemy combatant. Yet it is her status as a combatant that earns her a modest amount of respect from the soldiers, for the only Vietnamese they respect are those they engage in battle.

Chapter 13, My Lai in May

Chapter 13, My Lai in May Summary and Analysis

One of the most heavily mined areas of Vietnam, the villages of the My Lai are dangerous and produce many fatalities. Located near the coast in the northern-most corner of South Vietnam, the area is referred to as Pinkville, due to the sandy red clay that weaves its way through the villages, and because on the military maps the area is shaded in pink. O'Brien finds the name Pinkville ironic, because the name has a carnival aspect and yet the area is a bombed out wasteland of the population center it used to be. The villages are treacherous because the Viet Cong find support among the residents. The soldiers cannot tell enemy from friend, as all Vietnamese look the same. Charlie could be a ten-year-old, an eighty-year old, or a beautiful young woman. O'Brien encounters his heaviest and most frequent combat experiences in these villages. He struggles with his capabilities as a soldier. During attacks he throws himself to the ground screaming and yelling; only sometimes does he try to return fire. He does manage to operate the radio.

Guerrilla warfare is disjointed and sporadic, and so is the tone in this chapter. In one instance, O'Brien is a thoughtful soldier chronicling his experiences, and then his anger bursts through his narrative, showing that he is as much a part of the experience, although he writes as if he is merely an observer. He is enraged, though he wishes to distance himself; he too is affected by the war and plays a small part in its brutality. Alpha Company moves forward through the My Lai, across a bridge that is open to sniper fire, through rice paddies and lakes, all the while dodging bullets and getting no help or information from the local population.

The anger and frustration deepens for the soldiers. They take vengeance by setting fire to thatch roofed huts as they pass, burning entire villages as they go. "It was good to walk from Pinkville and see fire behind Alpha Company. It was good, just as pure hate is good", O'Brien writes. The forty-eighth Viet Cong battalion continues to attack the soldiers, as stealthy as ghosts, with various explosives. In Alpha Company, rage boils over and several lieutenants beat the faces of the Vietnamese women they come across, and then cut off their long black hair, crying as they do so. Another officer pistol-whips a Vietnamese prisoner.

As Alpha Company loads the body parts of their dead into plastic body bags for a helicopter evacuation (a dust off) they call in air strikes and napalm rains down on the villages of the My Lai. As O'Brien listens to the screams of the dying Vietnamese in the napalmed villages, he thinks of his two friends in body bags and has a hard time feeling any remorse. Several days later, continuing their march, the lieutenant Mad Mark takes a pot shot at a farmer working in his rice paddy, for no reason other than sport, then reports to headquarters that the farmer is a Viet Cong trying to evade. Every day Alpha Company is beaten down with explosives until the officers decide to head for the ocean,

but they are pursued and attacked. The soldiers leave the beach, heading to the next village and the next concealed landmine.

Chapter 14, Step Lightly

Chapter 14, Step Lightly Summary and Analysis

O'Brien details with great anger the different types of mines one comes across in the My Lai. Bouncing Betty is the explosive that scares the soldiers the most. Once a soldier steps on the three pronged mine, it leaps up one yard and kills. Booby-trapped mortar and artillery rounds are often suspended from tree branches or buried, particularly beneath the floors of thatched huts. The M-14 anti-personnel mine takes off toes and feet. Booby-trapped grenades in tin cans attached to trip wires blow a man to pieces. The Soviet TMB and Chinese anti-tank mines detonate under vehicles or large soldiers. The directional fragmentation mine has the effect of a twelve-gauge shotgun fired at close range. The corrosive action car killer is a grenade wrapped with a rubber band tossed into the gas tank, where the gas eats away at the rubber band and within a week the car blows up.

In this chapter, O'Brien writes with unabashed rage directly to a reader that has no experience of war and may judge the soldiers harshly for how they conduct combat. The effect of the constant danger from mines results in vengeance exacted on Vietnamese villagers; it ruins a man's psyche. The men of Alpha Company try to fight this fear with hard-nosed humor, and by keeping their eyes open so much they dry out. They fight paralyzing fear with each step they take, following the man's footprint ahead. Sometimes when a soldier's buddy blows up from a mine, he goes crazy, digging a foxhole like a mad man, screaming and cussing and throwing things around, beating the dirt to death.

More often, the soldiers deal with death by making jokes. They cannot afford to be bitter until much later, after they have safely returned home. Alone and alive back in the States, back in the world, is when bitterness sets in. O'Brien sends a direct message to anyone who criticizes this war-weary bitterness, or claims a soldier has no reason to be so bothered by the necessary acts of war. O'Brien throws down a gauntlet to the reader that they too can go to Vietnam on vacation one day, and walk the paths where so many mines were buried. O'Brien makes it clear that there are many mines left to explode, as the US military, and specifically Alpha Company, did not detonate all of them.

Chapter 15, Centurion

Chapter 15, Centurion Summary and Analysis

During a sweep through a village, Alpha Company finds a Viet Cong rifle in a well. Captain Johansen orders a search of the village and the soldiers rip through the hamlet like maniacs. They dump sand in the well, kick over jugs of rice, tear hay out of pigpens, and rip up the floors of huts. The soldiers find no additional incriminating evidence. They take prisoners for the night, a practice that seems to afford them some protection from nighttime Viet Cong attacks. The lieutenants bind and gag three old Vietnamese men, and attach them to a tree for the night. O'Brien spends the night on radio watch. He watches the old men sleep, the trees bending with their bodies.

Bates, a buddy of O'Brien's, remarks that it isn't right, having the old men tied to a tree all night. Bates believes they should be released. They both know the old men will be beaten the next morning for information about the rifle. Bates and O'Brien do not release the old men. In the morning they are beaten before Alpha Company moves on towards to another village. In this chapter, a more complex view of courage and cruelty in combat emerges. The men of Alpha Company are exhausted and enraged by an enemy they cannot see. Despite this anger, a few of the soldiers, such as Bates and O'Brien, retain a sense of right and wrong—yet they are not brave enough to act upon it. They do not participate, but they do not risk the anger of the company to do what they feel is right.

Chapter 16, Wise Endurance

Chapter 16, Wise Endurance Summary and Analysis

Captain Johansen, the revered leader of Alpha Company, finishes his last days as company commander in Vietnam. O'Brien respects Johansen. He views him as the only living example of a hero he has ever known. Johansen at times engages O'Brien in conversation or a chess game, having grown as close as officers can with the enlisted because O'Brien carries the radio for him, and is always at his side. Before his departure, Johansen suddenly remarks to O'Brien that he would rather be brave than anything else. He asks O'Brien what he feels about that. Johansen realizes that O'Brien is sensitive, pensive; while not the best soldier, he dutifully carries the radio behind Captain Johansen. This close proximity to the company commander and the antennae of the radio make O'Brien an attractive target for the Viet Cong. O'Brien does not accept Johansen's subtle complement of his efforts, as he feels that there is no way he could measure up to the courage and character of Captain Johansen.

O'Brien does not admire the other officers as much as he does Johansen. Although Mad Mark is impressive, he is also repulsive due to his actions such as cutting off ears and shooting unarmed farmers. Captain Johansen is equally fierce in battle, but he is not excessive. On a day Alpha Company lost several men, Johansen led a charge into a rice paddy, engaging the Viet Cong face to face and making a kill. But this was a battle kill against an armed enemy. It is this courage to make the right kind of combat, with courage that is proper and wise, that impresses O'Brien. It impresses O'Brien because he is terrified and is face down in the muck when the bullets fly, yet Johansen charges the Viet Cong head-on, fully aware that he could die. In fact, soldiers did die in that charge.

O'Brien examines this courage, seeking an adequate definition. He refers to Plato's discussion of courage in the dialogue "Laches". O'Brien thinks Johansen is the perfect guard of the "Platonic Republic". O'Brien wrangles with this question of courage as wise endurance. He wonders if his enduring military service, despite his belief that the war is wrong, is courageous, or if it is merely lacking in wisdom. O'Brien doubts that his endurance is courageous, because although he does not engage in abuse of the Vietnamese when the rest of Alpha Company does, he does nothing but stand aside.

He remembers one day when Alpha Company came across two young Vietnamese boys herding cows in a "free-fire" zone. The entire company opened fire on them, except O'Brien. He endured that episode like so many others, but it was not wise endurance, it was not courage. O'Brien returns to Plato for intellectual guidance on the meaning of courage. His reading of Plato states that courage without wisdom, without knowing for certain that what a man does is right, is not true courage. "Courage is more than the charge". O'Brien decides this is what makes Johansen a real leader, he also has the wisdom and character to accompany his courage to charge into battle.

The other men of Alpha Company do not think as much as O'Brien. Thinking too much, or voicing concerns about dying, is taboo. Only Captain Johansen consciously thinks of what it meant to be brave, and he discusses it with O'Brien. When Johansen leaves Alpha Company, O'Brien likens it the Trojans losing Hector. Johansen was a role model to respect and trust, a man to follow into battle. Subsequent commanders could not replicate Johansen's leadership. In O'Brien's opinion, Captain Johansen showed that a man can be courageous, poised, and graceful in the middle of combat in a very wrong war.

Chapter 17, July

Chapter 17, July Summary and Analysis

Captain Smith takes command of Alpha Company after the departure of Captain Johansen. The soldiers don't trust Captain Smith because he is new to combat, a green officer. Smith leads Alpha Company back into the My Lai to the village of My Khe, accompanied by a column of armored fighting vehicles mounted with fifty-caliber machine guns. As O'Brien is the radio carrier, he stays with Captain Smith and decides he does not like him. Smith is slovenly and inept, and he admits it. Captain Smith is not concerned with bravery and he is careless with lives of his men.

As they march through the villages looking for mines, they find nothing. For protection at night, they round up old women and children as prisoners, herding them into a stagnant rice paddy surrounded by the soldiers. By the next morning, Alpha Company is lulled into a calm feeling by the uneventful day before. They trudge through a marsh, knee deep in mud. The soldiers climb onto the armored vehicles to get across more easily, taking off their gear, hanging their feet over the side. Their morning reverie is broken by an attack. Halfway across the marsh, they are hit by rocket-propelled grenades. The soldiers dive off the vehicles into the swampy muck. The armored vehicles reverse backwards at full speed, running over soldiers as they return fire. Captain Smith did not know his warfare tactics well enough to know that armored vehicles go into reverse at full speed when attacked in Vietnam. Several men die or are maimed.

The firefight ends in carnage as the men are in disarray due to bad leadership. Captain Smith calls in an air strike of napalm on the village. Smith is not helpful locating and rounding up the dead and wounded. He then orders Alpha Company to continue to march through the villages, where they encounter explosives and lose more men. Captain Smith argues with the lieutenants over strategy after Alpha Company tallies seventeen men lost in just thirty minutes of combat. Back at the base camp, Captain Smith is openly ridiculed, no longer able to command any respect at all. He leads Alpha Company on a few more missions, taking heavy casualties each time. After one last mission to a monastery on a mountain, Captain Smith is relieved of command.

Chapter 18, The Lagoon

Chapter 18, The Lagoon Summary and Analysis

In the Batangan peninsula, Alpha Company is assigned to protect a Vietnamese camp on the beaches of a lagoon. The camp's inhabitants are refugees, South Vietnamese chased from their homes by heavy fighting and the Viet Cong. The lagoon was once full of the tropical beauty that characterizes Vietnam, but it has been ravaged by war. The coral reefs and sandy beaches are a treacherous paradise. The perimeter of the camp is surrounded by barbed water. The outside of the perimeter where the sand meets the jungle is ringed with mines: Bouncing Bettys, booby-trapped grenades, and artillery rounds. This semi-circular minefield forces the camp's inhabitants and the soldiers to spend their days on the beach or in the waters of the lagoon.

In the center of the refugee camp is a makeshift flag pole on which is raised a tattered South Vietnamese flag. At night, the Vietnamese men of the camp set sail in lantern-lit canoes. At dawn, the fishermen return with their catch and the women spend the day cleaning and cooking the fish. Alpha Company's mission at the lagoon is less stressful, yet more surreal, than the marches through the My Lai. The soldiers suffer few casualties until an American base in the area accidentally fires a round of mortars into the bizarrely idyllic fishing village, interrupting the days and nights of calm imprisonment by the sea. Dozens of Vietnamese refugees are killed and wounded.

O'Brien notes with irony that the refugees were paid twenty dollars for each wounded and thirty-three dollars and ninety cents for each death. This chapter again highlights the difficult relationship between the Vietnamese and the Americans. Even in the best of circumstances, interactions between the Americans and the Vietnamese often end with casualties and humiliations.

Chapter 19, Dulce et Decorum

Chapter 19, Dulce et Decorum Summary and Analysis

A new commander takes over Alpha Company. One hour after taking charge of Alpha Company, the new commander leads the men into a minefield. Disgusted with leadership that does not live up to the example of Captain Johansen, O'Brien manages to acquire a three-day pass to Chu Lai, where he looks desperately for a job in the rear. A job at a base camp in the rear is an elusive dream for a foot soldier. It is elusive because it is almost tangible, unlike going home, back to the World. O'Brien receives another letter from Erik, but this correspondence is not enough to sustain him anymore.

The tone of the narrative alters to address another issue that plagues O'Brien during his military service. This is the only chapter in which O'Brien directly addresses race relations among soldiers in Vietnam. The rear jobs are most often open to the white soldiers willing to be overly sycophantic to company commanders. Black and Hispanic soldiers do not often get the chance. This meant that black and Hispanic soldiers comprised a disproportionately higher percentage of casualties than white soldiers. One white first sergeant perceived as racist and wont to give the rear jobs only to white men is "fragged" by a black soldier in Alpha Company. To be "fragged" is to be mysteriously killed in battle or by accident by another soldier, often by hand grenade. O'Brien, unlike many white soldiers, made friends among the black and Hispanic soldiers of his company. The soldier who killed the first sergeant bluntly informed O'Brien that this was the only way to deal with "Whitey". This seems to be the last straw for O'Brien.

In the midst of this ineffective and racist leadership, where death comes not only from the Viet Cong and explosives, but also from one's fellow soldier (even if they have a legitimate gripe), O'Brien decides he has had enough. He tries but has no luck obtaining a job in Chu Lai. He returns to Pinkville with Alpha Company for the month of August. The company endures a month of marches through the villages of the My Lai, nightly mortars, raiding bunkers, clearing underground tunnels, and death. Nerves frayed by a month of marching and combat, O'Brien finally earns a job in the rear at LZ Gator as a typist in battalion headquarters.

Chapter 20, Another War

Chapter 20, Another War Summary and Analysis

O'Brien settles in to his rear job as a typist at LZ Gator. His friend Bates has also obtained a rear job at LZ Gator, and they work together. O'Brien and his buddy get through the holidays the only way a soldier can—by drinking, eating what is served up in the mess hall, and attending the strip tease floor shows that pass through the base camp. Life is monotonous at LZ Gator, but it is safe. The base is attacked only once during his stay. At night, O'Brien sleeps on a cot in the office, reading, writing and standing watch over the phone for incoming casualty calls. He listens to the night music of LZ Gator, the rhythm of out-going artillery and mortar fire. He remembers how he loved the sound of that cover fire when he was a soldier in the field.

Soon after arriving at LZ Gator, O'Brien goes to Australia for R&R. He spends most of his time in the libraries. When he returns to LZ Gator, he writes a letter to Erik. He writes about the flight home on the "freedom bird", knowing that Erik will soon leave as well. O'Brien feels that this is a trip they should make together. He closes the letter with a scene he witnessed that morning—a Lieutenant forcefully kicked a Vietnamese woman out of the sleeping quarters. O'Brien did nothing, he watched silently. Doing nothing made him feel disgusting, like a peeping tom.

Now that O'Brien spends long and tedious days as a typist, he has time to return to his examination of courage, and his examination of his own character. He admits to himself that he has been a passive observer to too much brutality in Vietnam. If he were truly brave he would stand up for what he believes is right. Yet, just as he was afraid of the consequences of standing up for his beliefs in the US, he is also too afraid to do so in Vietnam.

Chapter 21, Hearts and Minds

Chapter 21, Hearts and Minds Summary and Analysis

A Vietnamese scout who works with the US Army requests leave to go to his village to help his wife with their youngest child, a baby overcome with illness. An Army Captain refuses to let the scout go to his village because he has a mission to lead a march with a company of soldiers. The scout repeatedly insists to be allowed to go to his village and the Captain refuses, claiming that only the scout has the knowledge the soldiers need to get their job done. The Captain lectures the scout that he, like all other soldiers, serves in Vietnam to help the scout and all Vietnamese fight the Viet Cong. The Captain insists that the scout should be willing to make as many sacrifices as the American soldiers have to win the war. The soldiers are not allowed to go home when their kids are sick. The scouts are not allowed to either. The scout insists that the soldiers don't like him and treat him badly. He claims he is afraid to go on a march with them. The Captain mocks his fear. The scout leaves angry, and is AWOL two days later. This chapter once again emphasizes the strained relationship between the American soldiers and the Vietnamese, yet in this instance it is patronizing and arrogant more than violent.

Chapter 22, Courage is a Certain Kind of Preserving

Chapter 22, Courage is a Certain Kind of Preserving Summary and Analysis

Major Callicles is the battalion executive officer O'Brien works for as a typist. The Major is a professional soldier who thrives on discipline. A large barrel-chested man, the Major despises long hair, facial hair, drugs, excessive drinking, and prostitution. He wages a personal crusade against liberalism infecting the US military. Several months after Major Callicles takes charge of the battalion, news of the previous year's My Lai massacre breaks. Journalists flood the base camp LZ Gator. The major is consumed by the My Lai scandal. It is an event that he cannot accept. In his world-view, the US military is too honorable to commit such a crime. The stress breaks down Major Callicles; it shows in the bursting blood vessels on his face and perpetually blood shot eyes.

Though the evidence of the My Lai massacre is unequivocal, Major Callicles is incapable of denigrating or blaming the military institution he so loves. The Major spins out of control, defending the military with any irrational or insulting excuse he can think of to push away the hounding journalists. Major Callicles gives as an excuse the old adage that war is brutal, civilians die, and there are no non-combatants when you can't tell friend from foe. Major Callicles flies the journalists to My Lai 4 in helicopters to look at the gravesites and lifeless villages. When the investigation of the My Lai massacre ends, Major Callicles receives a military commendation for his part, but he throws the commendation in the garbage. He goes to the officers club and drinks heavily.

In effect, Major Callicles becomes what he hates the most: a soldier that has lost his mind and his self control in uniform. O'Brien attempts to engage Major Callicles in a dialogue about killing Vietnamese civilians. O'Brien refers to Army training, international law, and the basic principles of right and wrong. Major Callicles can't see beyond his own militaristic world view to offer more than a facile response. The Major replies that because the Vietnamese of North and South look alike, and the Viet Cong use kids, the elderly, and women as spies and insurgents, then every Vietnamese civilian is a combatant. O'Brien responds that by that logic, the Army should just kill every person in Vietnam. Major Callicles accuses O'Brien of exaggerating.

Major Callicles continues to lose control, drinking, gambling, and harassing every vehicle at the gate of LZ Gator to uncover the soldiers who carry drugs. The Major is devoured by an insatiable desire to walk the wire, then go beyond the wire and raid a nearby village, a village O'Brien began his first experiences in, Tri Binh 4. O'Brien is forced to obey the Major and accompany him on a drunken midnight raid, just the two of them with one Vietnamese scout and one squad of soldiers. The Major challenges O'Brien to set up a Claymore mine; he pesters and teases him for being a college

graduate. The Major doubts aloud in front of the other soldiers that O'Brien has any real combat experience.

Major Callicles wants to humiliate O'Brien for his infuriating habit of asking difficult questions, for his educated reasoning. Soon, the Major falls into a sudden and deep alcohol-induced sleep. The other soldiers ask O'Brien if the Major is insane. Fortunately, they encounter no Viet Cong on this rainy night. Major Callicles wakes up as suddenly as he fell asleep and they return to LZ Gator before sunrise. This bizarre nighttime sortie earns Major Callicles a rebuke from his superiors. In one final act of insanity, Major Callicles burns down a brothel, and is given forty-eight hours to leave the base camp permanently.

Major Callicles does not earn any respect from O'Brien; not because he is insane, but because like Captain Smith, the Major falls short of the Platonic ideals of courage. Captain Smith admits he is unskilled and brave. Major Callicles, however, pretends to be brave yet quickly falls apart under siege. O'Brien also touches upon another more subtle issue in this chapter: the issue of disillusionment with military service. Professional soldiers characteristically have the same faith and support for the military as Major Callicles. Here, O'Brien deftly demonstrates what happens to a faithful soldier when they are faced with a circumstance that damages their unquestioning trust in the institution of the military for which they have sacrificed so much, and witnessed so much death and destruction. It breaks a man's spirit, and in some cases, their psyche.

Chapter 23, Don't I Know You

Chapter 23, Don't I Know You Summary and Analysis

O'Brien's year in Vietnam is over. He boards a plane to go home and notes that "there is no joy in leaving. Nothing to savor with your eyes or heart". The stewardess walks through the cabin and sprays an anti-bacterial spray on the seats and on the soldiers. As O'Brien seats himself, he notices her detached smile and feels worn out. He leaves during the night. He cannot see the earth as the plane takes off. The earth of Vietnam is the only aspect of the country that O'Brien felt he understood, having immersed himself in it's muck, rivers, rice paddies, oceans, lagoons, and foxholes. He knew how the earth smelled in different regions of Vietnam and the different colors of clay.

During the long flight, he thinks about what he has learned during the war and finds it is not all that different from what he used to hear the old men say about WWII and the Korean War. He arrives in Seattle and goes to a processing center bearing a banner that says "Welcome Home Returnees". After a meal, some paperwork, and reciting the pledge of allegiance, O'Brien leaves the US Army in a taxi to catch a flight home to Minnesota. The plains of the prairie to which he returns are hard, still frozen under the receding snows of winter, unchanged despite the changes he has dealt with in the past year. "In return for all your terror, the prairies stretch out, arrogantly unchanged". In the airplane restroom, he changes into civilian clothes and rolls up his uniform into his satchel. When he goes home, he feels only a small stirring of happiness.

Characters

The Narrator-Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien is the narrator and main character of this memoir. A native of Minnesota, he is drafted the summer after he finishes college. During and before basic training, O'Brien contemplates dodging the draft and deserting boot camp, but decides not to. He is haunted by the prospect of embarrassing his loved ones back home in Minnesota. This fear is so powerful it overcomes his deep opposition to participating in the Vietnam War.

When O'Brien arrives in Vietnam he is no longer the polite college boy from the prairie he was before basic training, yet he is still very green and naïve about the ways of war. He stumbles through his first few weeks in Vietnam. He is given an assignment as a radio operator, yet still feels out of place and slightly terrified in the mysterious jungles of Vietnam. He bemoans the frustrating inability to tell friend from foe and the abuses that fall on the Vietnamese people. O'Brien loses several friends to explosives. He feels the rage of the other soldiers, and lifts his Zippo lighter to a few thatched roof huts in revenge along with the others. His experience forces him to examine the ideals of courage, wisdom, and his own lack of valor. He names himself as the man who does not participate in the brutality but watches it nonetheless, and he is not proud of himself. Combat is terrifying and O'Brien is happy to finally get a rear job, but he finds very little satisfaction. He weathers the investigation of the My Lai massacre alongside the maniacal Major Callicles. Throughout his year in Vietnam, he witnesses so much brutality, death, and disillusionment that, in the end, he is too empty to enjoy his departure.

The Viet Cong

In Vietnam, the character that haunts every mission is the Viet Cong. The Viet Cong is not the regular army of the north (the NVA, or North Vietnamese Army). The Viet Cong is the shadowy insurgent army fighting to liberate southern Vietnam from the Americans, just as the American soldiers are fighting the Viet Cong to liberate the Vietnamese from the insurgents. The Viet Cong is most often referred to as Charlie, or the VC.

The Viet Cong is the enemy of all US forces in Vietnam. They are mysterious, and as O'Brien writes, Charlie finds American soldiers more often than American soldiers find Charlie. They are stealthy fighters, nearly invisible in their native tropical habitat. They are a constant source of frustration and hatred for the soldiers. The Viet Cong blend in seamlessly with the population. They employ women, children, and old men. This incites the soldiers to rage and fuels maltreatment of the general Vietnamese population in the villages they march through. O'Brien only sees the VC alive twice during his service. Even one kill is considered a great triumph because they are so hard to find. Although the American soldiers loathe and hunt the Viet Cong, the VC are the only Vietnamese

for which the soldiers have respect. In general, the soldiers are not kind to the Vietnamese. Vietnamese are treated as servants, errand boys, or prostitutes, or they are patronized and assaulted. Most soldiers openly exhibit racism and call them "dinks". Yet the ferocity and stealth of the Viet Cong earn them a reputation. They are feared and slightly admired. Soldiers occasionally take a souvenir off a dead VC, like an ear, as proof that they killed one of the Charlie phantoms. The only woman to be treated with respect in this memoir is a dying Viet Cong soldier shot during combat with Alpha Company. The soldiers admire her for fighting, and for dying well.

Drill Sergeant Blyton

Drill Sergeant Blyton has the task of making soldiers out of the diverse group of recruits that disembark from every bus load of draftees to arrive at Ft. Lewis. He is a professional soldier of the traditional kind. He detests weakness and intellect. He often humiliates or degrades the recruits if they do not fit his ideal of a model soldier. He refuses to entertain any discussion that opposes the Vietnam War.

The Chaplain

During Advanced Infantry Training at Ft. Lewis, O'Brien meets with the Chaplain for guidance concerning his opposition to the Vietnam War. The Chaplain is friendlier than the Drill Sergeant, yet his easy banter soon betrays a dislike for O'Brien's beliefs and education. The Chaplain is more of a military officer than a spiritual counselor.

The Battalion Commander

The Battalion Commander at Ft. Lewis, Washington, meets with O'Brien after the Chaplain failes to answer O'Brien's questions or provide adequate guidance. The Battalion Commander also fails to understand O'Brien. He believes O'Brien is simply afraid of dying and ignores the questions of justice and morality. The Battalion Commander dusts dandruff from O'Brien's shoulders, gives him a few superficial words of encouragement, and sends him back to the barracks.

Captain Johansen

Captain Johansen is the blond, blue eyed and tall commander of Alpha Company. O'Brien considers Johansen to be a flesh and blood hero because he is wise and brave in battle, and he fits the Platonic ideals of courage that O'Brien so admires.

Mad Mark

Mad Mark is a platoon leader in Alpha Company. He is also a Lieutenant and had trained as a Green Beret. He is dubbed mad because he is actually insanely calm. He

has a mercenary's skill and the bearing of a professional soldier. He stands out from the others also because he wears tiger fatigues and goes into battle with a shotgun, which is only effective at close range. O'Brien admires Mad Mark's skill and courage, which is effortless. He does not begrudge him an Aristotelian approach to soldiering, which is that making war is a natural profession, but it is just a profession. Though O'Brien admires Mad Mark, he is disappointed when he returns from a night ambush mission with a piece of VC ear. Afterwards, O'Brien considers him merely repulsive.

Captain Smith

A short, fat, ROTC officer from Tennessee, Captain Smith takes command when the much-loved Captain Johansen finishes his tour and leaves Vietnam. Captain Smith is neither brave nor skilled in battle. He often gives wrong directions and wrong coordinates. He is careless with the lives of his men. O'Brien does not respect him because he does not measure up to Captain Johansen.

Major Callicles

Major Callicles is the third of the trilogy of characters through which O'Brien examines courage in this memoir. A beefy professional soldier with the build of a heavy weight boxer Major Callicles claims to run a tight ship, thriving on discipline. Whereas Johansen is the epitome of courage, and Captain Smith is a foolhardy coward, Major Callicles is a man who acts like a brave man, goes on crusades he feels are courageous, and yet fails. He does not add up to the sum of his illusions. He is not strong enough to weather the investigation of the My Lai massacre. He is not wise enough to see beyond the necessary acts of war to really examine the reasons for the soldier's behavior during the massacre. O'Brien perceives this as a lack of character and intellect. Major Callicles detests O'Brien for his ideas and education, and seeks to humiliate him.

Bates

Bates is O'Brien's buddy in Alpha Company. He is not as intellectual as O'Brien, nor is he particularly brave. Thus, O'Brien does not hold him in the same level of esteem as Erik or Captain Johansen. But Bates does understand the absurdity of the Vietnam War, and demonstrates a certain level of compassion for the Vietnamese people. Like O'Brien, Bates is not brave enough to act on his convictions. Nevertheless, by exhibiting a certain moral sense that sets him apart from other soldiers, he is O'Brien's friend in battle. They manage to get assignments together in the rear.

Erik

A calm and skinny college graduate in basic training becomes O'Brien's only friend to survive the degrading brutality of learning to become a soldier. As intellectuals, they

bond over literature and analytic reasoning. They have both been to Europe. They both disagree with the Vietnam War, but are unable to either dodge the draft or desert. In Vietnam, they are assigned to different places. They do not ever see each other but they write long letters back and forth. These letters are full of literature, poetry critique, and insightful anecdotes. Erik chose to sign up for two years of military service to work in the rear in order to avoid combat. He finds it difficult to understand O'Brien's combat experiences. He admits that he too is just an observer in a horror show. He shares O'Brien's belief that because they survive Vietnam when so many others didn't, there is a guilty burden to be borne.

Objects/Places

Minnesotaappears in non-fiction

This is the place of O'Brien's birth, where he grows up and goes to college. It is in Minnesota that O'Brien develops his intellectual and political views. O'Brien spends the last of his carefree days in Minnesota before he leaves for basic training. It is his need for the love and respect of the people in his home town in Minnesota that prevents him from deserting.

Ft. Lewisappears in non-fiction

Ft. Lewis is the location of basic training and Advanced Infantry Training. Ft. Lewis is in Washington State, a cold wet backdrop for O'Brien's induction to military service. This is where he makes his plans to desert to Norway via Canada, and attempts to implement his plan. O'Brien gives up and returns to his barracks at Ft. Lewis.

Vietnamappears in non-fiction

Vietnam is the most important location in the memoir. A tropical country in Southeast Asia, Vietnam is a mystical place of treacherous and war-ravaged beauty. It is a country that remains misunderstood by the soldiers. O'Brien explains that the only aspect of Vietnam he felt he understood a little bit was the soil and earth. The Vietnam O'Brien brings to life in this memoir is a country of beautiful vistas, deadly tunnels and trails, and oriental mystery incomprehensible to a boy from the plains of Minnesota. The sunsets of Vietnam are vibrant red, pink, and gold. Twilight in the jungle quickly fades to black. The jungles of Vietnam seem to move and writhe with some enigmatic presence, or with the enemy. The whispering motion of the jungle's foliage plays tricks on the men's psyche as they imagine every danger hidden in the black green forests. It is as if Vietnam is capable of some magic hypnosis that makes men mad.

Weapons of Warappears in non-fiction

The most significant object in this memoir is a group of objects, the weapons of warfare. In basic training, O'Brien learns to use weapons and how to take them apart and clean them. In Advanced infantry training, he learns how to use more weapons of war more efficiently. In Vietnam, before he is assigned to Alpha Company, O'Brien learns to use and avoid the deadliest of weapons—mines. O'Brien is also assigned the position of radio operator. Through this radio, calls are made to order air support, bringing bombs and Napalm down on the surrounding villages. The Vietnamese villagers live in fear of extermination by Napalm. And no soldier marches without guns and grenades, and often, Claymore mines. No soldier sits down or takes a step without fear of being blown up by triggering a Bouncing Betty in the My Lai. O'Brien dedicates Chapter 14 to a

discussion of the types of explosives one encounters in Vietnam. The lagoon where Alpha Company bivouacs is surrounded by explosives, and the refugee camp is torn apart by mortars. Even when O'Brien lands a rear job at battalion headquarters, he is coerced and ridiculed by Major Callicles on a nighttime sortie to prove his prowess with a Claymore mine. From the time O'Brien arrives in Vietnam to his departure, the uses and effects of weapons of war punctuate his experience.

Chu Laiappears in non-fiction

This is the location of a very large base camp named the "Combat Center". This is the point of arrival for O'Brien and the place he searches for a job in the rear when he tires of combat. This base is a hot destination for soldiers due to the bars, beaches, strip tease shows, and visiting entertainment from the United States, such as Bob Hope.

My Laiappears in non-fiction

This regional hamlet is comprised of several small villages in the northern-most corner of South Vietnam. O'Brien marches through this area several times with Alpha Company, particularly in the village of My Khe. This region is also referred to as Pinkville, due to the sand and the pink shading of this area on military maps. This is the most dangerous area for soldiers because it is heavily mined and booby-trapped. The residents of these villages are suspected of helping the Viet Cong's forty-eighth battalion. The famous massacre took place in Vietnam before O'Brien arrives in country; however, the investigation of the massacre takes place while O'Brien is in Vietnam.

LZ Minutemanappears in non-fiction

In the Batangan Peninsula, the men of Alpha Company sweat through the heat of April at Landing Zone Minuteman. The climate in the peninsula is brutal, and the soldiers rarely venture forth from LZ Minuteman during their stay there. The significance of this place is that it serves as a contrast to other locations in Vietnam. LZ Minuteman is a place of heat-induced lethargy, where the soldiers do nothing and ignore their missions. At their next location, they will engage in combat constantly. This location highlights the ups and downs of a soldier's life in Vietnam, where periods of boring inactivity are followed by intense sequences of combat.

LZ Gatorappears in non-fiction

Landing Zone Gator is the base camp for Alpha Company, not far from Chu Lai. This camp is where O'Brien is assigned to Alpha Company upon arrival in Vietnam. He experiences his first nighttime attack at this base camp before he enters real combat. Later in the memoir, O'Brien obtains a rear job assignment as a typist at this base camp with battalion headquarters. LZ Gator is where O'Brien terminates his service in Vietnam.

The Lagoonappears in non-fiction

This area of Vietnam near the Batangan Peninsula is the location of a refugee fishing camp. Alpha Company bivouacs in this lagoon for a month on a mission to protect the refugee camp of South Vietnamese fishermen and their families. The lagoon appears to be idyllic, yet it's beauty has been ravaged by war. Explosives and mines ring the perimeter, which is cordoned off by barbed wire. The refugees and soldiers live on the beach and spend long days literally in the ocean, for lack of anywhere else to go. The lagoon is a prison paradise whose strange peace is broken by misguided American mortar fire.

The Processing Center Seattleappears in non-fiction

After leaving Vietnam, O'Brien arrives in Seattle. At the processing center O'Brien completes the paperwork that frees him from service in the military. No longer in the US Army, O'Brien flies home to Minnesota.

Themes

Moral Ambiguity of the Vietnam War

The main theme of this memoir by Tim O'Brien is a constant moral and ethical struggle with his participation in a war he feels is unjust. Before he went to Vietnam, O'Brien notes that he wrote editorials against a war he did know he would have to fight. His opposition to the Vietnam War is visceral. It leads him to contemplate dodging the draft by going to Canada. Once in basic training, he formulates a thoroughly researched plan and a budget to desert the US Army by flying from Canada to Norway. Though O'Brien is unable to either dodge the draft or desert, he does try to get guidance from his Army Chaplain and battalion commander. He receives none. O'Brien realizes that the institution of the military does not provide moral counsel for its foot soldiers. The military O'Brien comes to know merely desires to churn out infantrymen for Vietnam-infantrymen who do not ask why or who they are to kill, nor demand to know the consequences for their mental and physical health.

With no guidance from the military, O'Brien turns to literature, a constant source of wisdom and comfort, and to his friend Erik who shares his beliefs, moral struggle over the war, and love of books. Once in Vietnam, O'Brien's preoccupation with the moral ambiguities of the war take on a different nuance when he becomes involved in combat. O'Brien struggles with rage against the Vietnamese as he witnesses one after another of his fellow soldiers die, yet he realizes that exacting vengeance upon villagers is morally wrong. He also deals with the moral dilemma posed by being the watcher that does nothing, like a "Roman in Golgotha", who neither participates in the violence nor prevents it.

The Meaning of Courage

An examination of the meaning of courage and wisdom is a constant preoccupation for O'Brien during his basic training and service in Vietnam. During basic training at Ft. Lewis, O'Brien realizes he is not brave enough to stand up for his moral beliefs and refuse to serve or desert. The specter of the loss of love and respect of family and friends proves to be stronger than O'Brien's ethical convictions. This failure to be courageous leads O'Brien into an obsession about and analysis of courage throughout his service in Vietnam. He notes that fighting in a war makes a man think hard about bravery. O'Brien realizes the paucity of heroes and role models he admired throughout his life in Minnesota, who were nothing more than cartoon and television characters.

As O'Brien survives many battles face down in the dirt screaming, and only occasionally mustering the wherewithal to engage in combat, he searches among his fellow soldiers for examples of the fortitude he does not possess. He discovers a living hero in Captain Johansen. Captain Johansen fits the Platonic description of a heroic and wise man that O'Brien so admires. O'Brien rejects the idea that courage is wise endurance, because

endurance is too passive an act in wartime. He prefers instead the Platonic definition of courage, which holds that true bravery is comprised of wisdom, bravery, courage, and temperance. By this definition, a truly courageous person does the right thing at the right time, fully aware of why he made the decision and the consequences he will have to bear. This is exactly the type of courage O'Brien decides he does not have.

Relations between the American Soldiers and the Vietnamese

In every chapter, O'Brien skillfully weaves the interactions between American soldiers and the Vietnamese. These interactions do not generally end well. During O'Brien's first few days with Alpha Company, he illustrates the bizarre interpersonal relationships that develop between Vietnamese villagers and American troops. The Vietnamese offer every kind of service they can to earn either a few dollars or goodwill from the soldiers. The Vietnamese children give massages, dig foxholes, run errands, and clean weapons. The elderly fetch water and wash clothes. The women sell coca cola and their bodies. Underneath this smiling servitude lurks a profound hatred for the soldiers, which the observant O'Brien occasionally perceives in the eyes of the women.

The hatred, O'Brien learns, emanates from the destructive and vengeful behavior of the soldiers as they march through villages and party hard in the base camps. During the course of this narrative, Vietnamese women's faces are bashed in, old men are tied to trees, women and children are herded into swamps, and village after village is destroyed by napalm. He does not understand the Vietnamese but he is empathetic to their situation. O'Brien understands how the enemy Viet Cong is able to find sympathizers and hide among the Vietnamese, even though he falls victim to senseless rage in one village, setting thatched roofed huts on fire out of hatred. In the lagoon, when American mortars rip even the most idyllic situation apart, O'Brien realizes the mission cannot possibly be successful in Vietnam, with one main reason being the unhealthy relationship between the Vietnamese and the Americans.

Several times O'Brien links the situation of the Vietnamese to his analysis of courage, such as when he sees officers and soldiers take cheap shots at old farmers and little boys herding cattle, and when he sees an officer brutally kick a Vietnamese woman out of his barracks in the morning. Major Callicles's crass analysis of the plight of the Vietnamese as nothing more than the necessary casualties of war merely hardens O'Brien's opinion of the doomed Vietnam War. Conversations with the Vietnamese, including the Scouts that work for the Americans, are carried out with derisive patronizing language. O'Brien illustrates that the only Vietnamese, male or female, for whom the soldiers have respect are those they engage in battle. O'Brien realizes that life for the Vietnamese population is untenable, yet he is not brave enough to risk his own neck to prevent, protect, interfere, or report this behavior. He merely observes, and he feels dirty and guilty for being an unwilling witness to so much brutality.

Style

Perspective

The Vietnam War permeated the years of Tim O'Brien's youth. "If I Die in a Combat Zone" is the first of several works written by Tim O'Brien that focus on that tumultuous period of American history. The son of WWII veterans, O'Brien grew up on the prairies of southern Minnesota, steeped in the mythology of the virtues of war. War stories and the notions that manhood means honor, duty, and courage in wartime were foundations of his upbringing, often the basis of his childhood games. O'Brien writes of playing with school friends as "taking on the Japs and Krauts along the shores of Lake Okabena, on the flat fairways of the golf course". As a college educated young man, he debates the moral conundrum of Vietnam with his friends, yet these debates are polite because they want to remain friends. This desire to maintain the status quo he knew from childhood vis-a-vis his friends and family outweighs his desire to avoid participating in an unjust war. O'Brien is plagued by the fear of letting down those he loves and respects in his small prairie towns, or bringing upon them any shame before their small town public. "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". His intended audience for this book primarily is his family, as stated by the dedication; however, his secondary and wider audience, as evidenced by the rough simple language he employs, is the mass public of America, to whom he would like to bring to life the reality of a year of life in Vietnam.

Tone

Tim O'Brien narrates this memoir in the first person. He occasionally writes in the second person, directly addressing the reader. This is a direct and strong attempt to engage the reader. This memoir is critical of the Vietnam War, but does not go as deep into antiwar analysis as it does an examination of courage. This is due in part to O'Brien's own admission that he was carried along by circumstances. His preoccupation with the concept of courage and Captain Johansen as the noble officer stops the memoir a hair short of real subversive antiwar literature. O'Brien writes using military terms or the rough vulgarity of soldiers and this evokes the texture and reality of the experience. The use of military language would normally alienate the reader; however, in this memoir, it pulls the reader deeper into the narrative through O'Brien's skillful explanations and descriptions. O'Brien employs the use of allegory and realism to convey the subtle yet deeper meaning of his scenes.

Structure

The memoir consists of twenty-three short chapters. The chapters are often out of chronological order. A few of the chapters are merely one and one-half to two pages

long. In the chapters that take place in Vietnam, characters often appear without previous introduction. The architecture of the memoir appears to follow an organization based on a grouping of similar experiences. For instance, instead of strictly adhering to a timeline, several chapters focus on an examination of one character or place, such as Captain Johansen and the definition of courage and wisdom, or the chapter entitled "Lagoon". O'Brien demonstrates a deep desire to directly engage the reader with the frequent use of the second person "you" throughout the memoir. He is successful at engaging the reader despite the rough insider language and vulgarity.

Quotes

"Things happened, things came to an end. There was no sense of developing drama." Chap. 1, p. 17

"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." Chap. 3, p. 31

"Without a backward glance at privacy, I gave in to soldiering. I took on a friend, betraying in a sense my wonderful suffering." Chap. 5, p. 42

"One of the most persistent and appalling thoughts that lumbers through your mind as you walk through Vietnam at night is the fear of getting lost, of becoming detached from the others, of spending the night alone in that frightening and haunted countryside." Chap. 8, p. 91

"There was no reliable criterion by which to distinguish a pretty Vietnamese girl from a deadly enemy; often they were one in the same person." Chap. 13, p. 119

"Frustration and anger built with each explosion and betrayal, one Oriental face began to look like any other, hostile and black, and Alpha Company was boiling with hate when it was pulled out of Pinkville." Chap. 13, p. 119

"You look ahead a few paces and wonder what your legs will resemble if there is more to the earth in that spot than silicates and nitrogen. Will the pain be unbearable? Will you scream or fall silent?" Chap. 14, p. 126

"We walk through the mines, trying to catch the Viet Cong 48th Battalion like inexperienced hunters after a hummingbird. But Charlie finds us more often than we find him. He is hidden among the mass of people, or in tunnels, or in jungles." Chap. 14, p. 129

"It is not a war fought for territory, nor for pieces of land that will be won and held. It is not a war fought to win the hearts of Vietnamese nationals, not in the wake of contempt drawn on our faces and on theirs, not in the wake of a burning village, a trampled rice paddy, a battered detainee." Chap. 14, p. 130

"Proper courage is wise courage. It's acting wisely, acting wisely when fear would have a man act otherwise." Chap. 16, p. 137

"Whatever it is, soldiering in a war is something that makes a fellow think about courage, makes a man wonder what it is and if he has it." Chap. 16, p. 140

"It is more likely that men act cowardly and, at other times, act with courage, each in different measure, each with varying consistency. The men who do well on the average, perhaps with one moment of glory, those men are brave." Chap. 16, p. 146

"We weren't the old soldiers of World War II. No valor to squander for things like country or honor or military objectives." Chap. 19, p. 174

"Needless to say, I am uncomfortable in my thoughts today. Perhaps it's that I know I will leave this place alive and I need to suffer for that." Chap. 20, p. 184

"We're trying to win a war here, and, Jesus, what the hell do you think war is? Don't you think some civilians get killed? You ever been to My Lai? Well, I'll tell you, those civilians—you call them civilians—they kill American GIs. They plant mines and spy and snipe and kill us. Sure, you all print color pictures of dead little boys, but the live ones—take pictures of the live ones digging holes for mines." Chap. 22, p. 191

"You add things up. You lost a friend to the war and you gained a friend. You compromised one principle and fulfilled another." Chap. 23, p. 204

"There is no joy in leaving. Nothing to savor with your eyes or heart." Chap. 23, p. 202

Topics for Discussion

O'Brien wrote If I Die in a Combat Zone as non-fiction, based on his personal experiences. How does O'Brien make the reader believe in his reliability as a narrator? What makes his interpretation of the Vietnam War authentic?

The twenty-three chapters of "If I Die in a Combat Zone" are brief and several chapters are not in chronological order. In what ways did the architecture of this memoir influence your understanding of O'Brien's experiences? What are a few reasons why O'Brien would structure his memoir this way?

Throughout this memoir O'Brien struggles with his belief that the war is wrong, his preoccupations of desertion, and the concepts of honor and courage. In what ways does the Army counsel the misgivings of the young O'Brien? How is he treated for voicing his concerns? How does O'Brien deal with these difficult issues during his training at Fort Lewis and in Vietnam? How do you feel about those who fled the US to dodge the draft, deserted, or went AWOL during the war?

Which passages or chapters do you find allegorical? Why?

Who are the soldiers that make the greatest impressions on O'Brien? What roles do they play in his experience as a foot soldier? How does he interact with them? Does he respect them or abhor them? Does he do as they do in battle, in treatment of the Vietnamese? What are the characteristics that set O'Brien apart from other soldiers, and what similarities with them does he share?

What roles do the Vietnamese women play in this memoir? How are they treated? How do the soldiers treat the other Vietnamese people they encounter in villages? Are the women treated differently than the children and old men? What effect does this have on the soldiers? What effect does the violence of the war have on Vietnam?

What does courage mean to O'Brien? Why is it so important to him? How does he analyze and define what it means to be courageous? What literature does he use in his rationalizations? What good and bad examples of courage does O'Brien encounter in Vietnam? How does O'Brien perform in battle? How does O'Brien feel about his own level of courage?

When O'Brien leaves Vietnam, he states that "There is no joy in leaving". Why does O'Brien feel no satisfaction in his departure? What lessons, if any, did he learn from the war? Does he feel his home has changed when he returns? How has he changed?

9. What other accounts of the Vietnam War have you read, or seen in films or television, or heard from through friends or family members? How do these other accounts compare to O'Brien's memoir? How has this memoir influenced your understanding and opinions about the Vietnam War?

Throughout the memoir, O'Brien and other characters highlight the difficulty the soldiers have distinguishing friend from enemy in Vietnam because the inhabitants of the North and South are the same people and look the same. Another problem is that non-traditional combatants such as women, children and old men participate in warfare. What effect does this have on the soldiers? What effect does this have on the Vietnamese population? How did this affect the war in general?

What lessons or insights does this memoir hold for current US military engagements in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and the Middle East? Are the same issues of courage and patriotism as important? What are the similarities and differences between these conflicts and the Vietnam War? How do the soldiers today tell friend from foe in military engagements, and how does this influence the interactions with American troops?

Do you think you are brave by O'Brien's standards? How do you think you would perform or behave in the same situation? Do you have similar concerns or objections to current conflicts in the Middle East? If you disagreed, would you still report for duty if drafted? Why or why not? Have you sought wisdom or advice elsewhere as O'Brien did through friends, family, colleagues, or literature? What effect did this have on you? What conclusions did you draw? How did it affect your reading of this memoir?