

In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War Study Guide

In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War by Tobias Wolff

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

In Pharaoh's Army: Memories of the Lost War Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1: Thanksgiving Special.....	4
Chapter 2: Command Presence.....	6
Chapter 3: White Man.....	8
Chapter 4: Close Calls.....	9
Chapter 5: Duty.....	10
Chapter 6: A Federal Offense.....	11
Chapter 7: The Lesson.....	12
Chapter 8: Old China.....	13
Chapter 9: I Right a Wrong.....	14
Chapter 10: Souvenir.....	15
September 11: The Rough Humor of Soldiers.....	16
Chapter 12: Civilian.....	17
Chapter 13: Last Shot.....	18
Characters.....	19
Objects/Places.....	22
Themes.....	24
Style.....	26
Quotes.....	28
Topics for Discussion.....	29



Plot Summary

"In Pharaoh's Army, Memories of the Lost War," by Tobias Wolff is an autobiographical account of the author's tour of duty in the Vietnam War and the aftermath of his experience as he attempted to adjust to civilian life. The account also describes the contributing factors that led Wolff to decide to serve his country, providing the insight that there are sometimes less than obvious reasons when one makes such a life-changing decision.

The story opens when Wolff and a fellow battalion officer, Sergeant Benet, are risking their lives on an unsafe road to travel to a village where they have arranged to trade a Chinese automatic weapon called a Chicom for a large-screen color television. It is Thanksgiving Day and they are determined to bring some normalcy into their lives. A two-hour Thanksgiving Day special of the western series, "Bonanza," will be airing and they are not going to miss it. They look forward to watching it in color and bringing just a small slice of their former lives into the chaos which has become their new reality.

But the chaos of war was not the first time that Wolff was forced to deal with the challenge of uncertainty in his life. He did not do well in school and his home life was in shatters. He had a supportive mother but his father was a liar and a con man and was serving time in prison when Wolff was in the process of deciding what to do with his life. After having dropped out of high school, Wolff was working as a crew mate on a Coast and Geodetic Survey ship. A night of too much partying caused him to miss his ship's departure. Since he had disappointed his mother too many times in the past, he decided he had to do something to make her proud and prove his worth. Those feelings and the fact that many writers he admired—especially Ernest Hemingway—had served in the military, led him to enlist.

Wolff's leadership skills, intelligence, and abilities were noted by his commanders in recruit training, even though he did not see those same qualities in himself. He was tapped to join Special Forces and attend language school in Washington, DC. He went on to Officer's Candidate School and parachute training and eventually was dispatched as a lieutenant to Vietnam where the war was raging.

Wolff describes his fears and uncertainty as he was thrown into a life-threatening situation which he was not prepared for. Tobias Wolff, who was destined to become a famed author, noted the surrealism of war through the filter of an artist and intellect. In Vietnam, every soldier lived every hour of every day in fear for his life. Those who did not lose their lives were witnesses to the loss of the lives of their fellow soldiers and friends and the other horrors and absurdities that are inherent in war.

After Wolff ends his tour of duty and returns to civilian life, the long tentacles of his experience did not let go so easily. Even years later, after Wolff earned a degree at Oxford, became a famous and successful author and had a family, the horrors of that one year in his life reemerged with little provocation and at the most unexpected times.



Chapter 1: Thanksgiving Special

Chapter 1: Thanksgiving Special Summary and Analysis

Tobias Wolff, accompanied by Sergeant Benet, drove the large truck down the narrow battered road. He honked his horn to clear the road ahead of them. Peasants were gathered on the road, blocking their passage. There was a twisted mass of metal from the collision of two bikes. Sergeant Benet, a large African-American, slunk down in his seat. He knew he was the only black man in the province. The peasants stood defiantly in the way until the last minute. The truck drove over the bikes, mangling them even more. Seven months before, there was less hostility between the soldiers and the people.

They traveled through the next several hamlets with no problem. There was always the threat of snipers but the bigger threat was from mines planted in the road. Wolff had seen a two-and-a-half-ton truck blow up right before his eyes as he was returning in a convoy from Saigon. The commanders told their soldiers that if they did everything right, they'd make it home. But it was a fantasy. He saw his friends and fellow soldiers - good guys who did everything right - die every day.

Soldiers were superstitious. Wolff carried a gold pocket watch that his fiancée had given everywhere. Somehow it would keep him safe. He was stationed in the Delta at the time. Up north, conditions were much worse. The North Vietnam Army units were much more tenacious than the Vietcong. The Vietcong struck and went on but the NVA hit and hit again and again. There were rumors that the NVA were stoned out of their minds and knew no fear and that American deserters were fighting on their side. Wolff didn't believe those rumors but he did believe the speculation that they had underground tunnels that led right to their base. In the Delta, the enemies were local guerrillas from local villages who attacked infrequently and without much firepower. They'd fire mortars at night and booby-track their trucks. Three American soldiers did not die in the hundreds in the Delta like the soldiers did up north.

In the States, Wolff belonged to the Special Forces where he became an officer. Since Wolff was conversant in Vietnamese, he was asked to join a battalion near My Tho that was in need of an adviser. As soon as they could find a replacement, he could return to his Special Forces unit that was at Bien Hoa. The opportunity came at a good time. Several of those he had gone through training with had recently been killed. He felt afraid and inadequate to lead a Special Forces unit although he would never admit it.

After drinking a good amount of gin and tonic, Wolff decided he was being cowardly and decided not to accept the Delta assignment. The next day he went to the personnel officer to decline the assignment but it was too late to change. That afternoon he was on a helicopter heading for the Delta. His battalion was headquartered in My Tho on the Mekong River. The city was designed by the French and had it not been for all the



Vietnamese, Wolff could have imagined that he was in Europe instead of Vietnam. Fortunately for those assigned in My Tho, there was very little violence. This was attributed to the possibility that the province chief was paying off the Vietcong; or, that it was a resting spot for exhausted guerrillas.

American soldiers were mostly banned from the city and had to stay in their base in Dong Tam. Wolff's battalion of 150 men and six howitzers was isolated in a field surrounded by rice patties. They were relatively unprotected and not as well supplied as the other battalions. He and Sergeant Benet arrived at the same time as advisers. They had to scrounge around for equipment and supplies. In fact they were on the road to Dong Tam the day they ran over the bikes to pick up a 21-inch color TV to watch a "Bonanza" two-hour special on Thanksgiving Day. Even though they knew it was dangerous to travel on the road alone, they wanted to get that TV. They brought along a Chicom, a Chinese assault rifle, that they would trade for the TV. They went to the signal company to pick up the TV. The base seemed strangely abandoned. They learned that there was a big show where Raquel Welch was performing. Their contact, Spec 4 Lyons, said there was a problem trading the TV for just one Chicom. The guy who had the TV wanted two Chicoms. They were determined to get a color TV so they went to the officer's club where they disconnected the 25" color TV and took it with them telling the cleaning lady that it had to be repaired.

On their way back they took a ferry that crossed the Mekong. Wolff spotted a Vietnamese woman who had worked in the base office. She was with her young nephew. The young boy had no TV and Wolff felt compelled to offer the 25" color to him. He would drop it off that night and it would be gift. Although he had good intentions, Benet saw it differently. He refused to give the TV away after all they'd been through to get it. They went back to their battalion, hooked up the big screen TV and watched "Bonanza." It was a treat and Wolff felt a sudden swelling of pride for his country.



Chapter 2: Command Presence

Chapter 2: Command Presence Summary and Analysis

After flunking out of school, eighteen-year-old Wolff worked on a Coast and Geodetic Survey ship. Perhaps it was his youth and his cheerfulness that was off-putting to some of the veteran sailors that caused their resentful attitude toward him. One day he had gone down by the idle propeller to see if it was in good repair. While down there, it was so cool and refreshing that he leaned his head against it and dozed off. He had just raised his head and walked away when another sailor started to the propeller. Had he still been leaning against it, he would have been mutilated and killed.

While ashore one evening, he got so drunk that he couldn't drag himself back to the ship. It departed without him. He was already a loser having dropped out of school. He couldn't upset his mother any further—she was the one person who believed in him. His father was no help. He was in jail in California for passing bad checks.

Ever since he was sixteen, Wolff called himself a writer. It was his passion and writing came to him effortlessly. After missing the boat, he thought of all the great writers he admired including James Jones, Irwin Shaw and Norman Mailer who had joined the military. And the writer who he admired the most and meant everything to him, Ernest Hemingway, had done his stint in the army. Wolff wanted to be respectable—unlike his father who had gone from airplane designer to grifter and convict. Sometimes Wolff told people that his father was dead.

It was probably smart not to go back to the ship. Ships can be dangerous places if someone aboard wants to kill you. Basic training was at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, in the hottest summer on record. Although it was tough, the training was good for him. He'd played sports in school and was more fit than many of his peers. Wolff was known to have "command presence," an arrogant stance and an erect posture. He was put in charge of the other recruits in his platoon.

Wolff volunteered for the airborne and was sent off to train as a radio operator at Fort Benning, Georgia. He immediately became friendly with another trainee, Hugh Pierce, who was like Wolff in that he seemed to flourish under the tough training and regimen that the recruits underwent. Nothing got to him or was too tough for him. The instructor could sit on his back and he'd still do his quota of push-ups.

Hooking up on the static line and leaping from C-130s was made less terrifying when the guys did the "stroll" to the open hatch and sang "My Girl" in falsetto. The sensation after leaping from the plane was first one of floating then transformed into one of falling—the latter being the most terrifying. The lucky jumpers landed in drop zones and rolled to a stop without incident. The unlucky ones landed in trees or on utility lines. In their



last week of jump school, Hugh and Wolff signed up for Special Forces and were sent to Fort Bragg. Special Forces was established from the OSS teams of World War II.

As training progressed in Special Forces, Wolff began to feel more and more inadequate. He was able to keep up with the others but he had an inner feeling that he didn't measure up. He was amazed that seemingly courageous veteran soldiers were afraid to go back to Vietnam on another tour and were very open about their fears. If these capable and seasoned soldiers were fearful, Wolff wondered how he could ever hold up over there. On some free days, Wolff would forget his worries. He and Hugh would buzz off to town and talk about their futures and books and chase girls. It was 1965 and the Air Force had started bombing Vietnam that spring. One thing they didn't do is talk about war.

In the fall, Hugh was transferred to medic's training at Fort Houston and Wolff was encouraged to apply for Officer Candidate School. He was accepted because of his "command presence." Wolff was sent to artillery school and then to language school in DC to learn Vietnamese. He lived in DC like a civilian and did as he pleased. He fell in love with a Russian girl named Vera who was an eccentric young woman who came from an eccentric family. They eventually became engaged. One day, he saw in the newspaper that Hugh had been killed in Vietnam. The news devastated Wolff. He was reassigned to jump school in North Carolina. After two weeks of training, Wolfe was in Vietnam.

Chapter 3: White Man

Chapter 3: White Man Summary and Analysis

Just a week after Thanksgiving, the division was ordered into the field. The people who lived in the area were taken to a detention camp. Marching through the field was difficult since so much of it was flooded. Everyone feared snipers and as the tallest man in the unit, Wolff figured he was a target. The snipers would focus on his height and his whiteness. And, Wolff was VERY white. He was assaulted one night by a group of Vietnamese coming out of a bar because he was mistaken for another white man who he looked nothing like. But apparently the white men looked all the same to the Vietnamese.

The battalion set up camp in a dry area. The Vietnamese soldiers they were traveling with made fires even though they were not supposed to do so at night. They cooked the fish they had gotten by tossing grenades into a pond they passed along the way. The Vietnamese sergeant had caught a stray puppy early and started hanging it over the fire. He was going to eat it. Wolff couldn't take it and ordered him to stop. Wolff had to pay him the equivalent of five dollars to get him to stop. They knew how to work the white man. Vera wrote that she was seeing someone else and "suspended" their engagement. Wolff was upset but not destroyed by the news. He hadn't been faithful to her either. The breakup did make him question where he was in life compared to her new lover who was a college graduate and had a job. He burned the novel that he had been writing. It was a romance.



Chapter 4: Close Calls

Chapter 4: Close Calls Summary and Analysis

There were so many ways to die such as minefields, snipers, guerrillas, and even the Vietnamese soldiers in their battalion who could turn on him. He could envision his head hanging in a Quonset hut as a trophy of war. Wolff had been shot at more than once. Being shot at wasn't a really what he considered a close call. His first one came on Easter when he attended services at a Catholic church—the only one he'd seen over there. Wolff and Benet went to a market after church. Wolff waited in the car while Benet dashed into the market. He leaned back in his seat and started to drift off. Suddenly, everything was silent—the silence literally woke him up. Other market goers began to back up and make a wide berth around the car. One woman warned him to look under the car. He looked underneath the truck and directly below his seat was a live hand grenade. The pin had been pulled.

Wolff was in shock. Benet came out and after realizing what was going on cleared the area, making the people retreat for cover. The grenade didn't go off and it was disposed of by the ordnance team. But the incident terrified Wolff.

Wolff's second close call was when he was attempting to load a howitzer onto a Chinook helicopter. After he hooked the howitzer on the Chinook's cable hook and it was being pulled up, the large weapon snapped free and Wolff stepped away just before it plummeted to the ground right where he had been standing. His third close call happened when a Colonel dispatched another adviser to the scene of a conflict. Wolff and the other soldier had been standing right next to each other. The Colonel could have chosen him just as well as the other guy. The soldier was killed that afternoon. Wolff didn't know the other soldier that well but his death haunted him. He he conflicted feelings of both relief and guilt.

Chapter 5: Duty

Chapter 5: Duty Summary and Analysis

Doc Macleod had finished his residency in Toronto. He planned to be a surgeon and figured he'd get a lot of practice on the ground in Vietnam. Sometimes Wolff would accompany Macleod on his calls to various outposts in the province. The people in this area were mainly farmers and were often attacked by Vietcong. Macleod would entrust Wolff to handle minor injuries, cuts and blisters. On one of these occasions he met Sergeant Fisher whose lieutenant had just been killed. Fisher had seen his lieutenant literally blown apart. Fisher was stranded by himself but was dedicated to the people in the village. Wolff invited him to fly back with them but Fisher apparently felt duty bound to the people and stayed.



Chapter 6: A Federal Offense

Chapter 6: A Federal Offense Summary and Analysis

Wolff's father sent him a belated Christmas card telling him he was proud of him. His father had gotten out of jail and was living in Manhattan Beach, California. Wolff hadn't heard from him in years. After Wolff's orders for Vietnam had come in, he made a quick visit to see his father. He surprised his father who was stunned to see his now grown son in military uniform. It was an awkward reunion. His father's appearance had also changed drastically over the years. His face was puffy—his nose looked like a cauliflower crown. His father insisted that he keep a pair of aviator sunglasses he loaned him. Perhaps it was symbolic of the many absent years and missing presents.

His father's apartment was small but well furnished. He always had the best like the expensive watch he was wearing. Wolff insisted on treating him to dinner. As the evening wore on and a goodly amount of wine was consumed, Wolff's father showed sparks of his old glib self-complimenting the chef and ingratiating himself to diners at neighboring tables. There had been a question that had been on Wolff's mind for years—was his father's side of the family Jewish. His father denied it but Wolff was skeptical. Wolff stayed the night on a pull out bed. Their reunion ended in an emotional silent hug.

The next day Wolff traveled to Oakland where he met up with Stu Hoffman who was also bound for Vietnam. They had a carefree day hanging around in San Francisco on Haight Street with the hippies. The next morning they met for breakfast and were joined by Stu's father who was less than thrilled that his son was abandoning the family's lucrative oil business in favor of serving in the military. Mr. Hoffman was aggressive in questioning Wolff about what he thought of the Army in general and General Westmoreland in particular. Westmoreland was responsible for a group of boys who, during a parachute drill stateside, had all plunged to their deaths. Bottom line, Mr. Hoffman didn't want his son to go. Wolff pointed out that if he deserted it would be a federal offense. After a few drinks in the piano bar, Stu and his father left. Wolff had had enough of Mr. Hoffman.

It was still dark the next morning when Wolff boarded the bus. The sense that he had passed the point of no return settled in on Wolff. He looked around and wondered how many of the young men on board would still be alive a year from then. He fantasized about being rescued by his father. But his father wasn't going to rescue him...he had let him go.

Chapter 7: The Lesson

Chapter 7: The Lesson Summary and Analysis

It was January 31, 1968, and the enemy had been coming into My Tho and the surrounding areas for weeks, gathering for the slaughter. No one knew. He and Benet stopped by a visiting carnival. When he reflected back on it, he realized that their presence had been part of the plan. The killing started at night. Wolff was in his bunk. Had he been on the road, it would have been end of story. The first soldier killed was exiting a bar late at night. In addition to American soldiers, the invaders were targeting Vietnamese soldiers, politicians and police. Reports came in that the VC had invaded all the towns in the Mekong Delta. Every airfield had been hit and every road cut off. They were even in the American embassy. The Tet Offense had begun. Major Chau, Wolff and Benet pored over a map, trying to figure out a strategy.

Shells began hitting close to their barracks. A spotter plane flying above reported that there was a large body of men approaching the perimeter behind them. Major Chau launched a blistering assault and killing most of the VC with only a few escaping to the outer road. The battalion had plenty of ammunition and kept up firing into the night. They blew up the road leading from My Tho so they couldn't be attack with ground vehicles. Later they bombarded some of the buildings in town that had been overtaken by the enemy. They knocked down bridges and sunk boats. Wolff and Benet were dubious about Chau. Might he cut and run and join the other side? After a couple of days, American fighter jets showed up and literally finished off the town. Even after two weeks, the town was still smoldering. Hundreds of corpses were found. The image of the little feet of children sticking out from the end of mats piled with the dead stuck in Wolff's mind. The Vietcong taught the lesson that once the VC were in a town, the Americans would not distinguish them from other Vietnamese and kill them all.



Chapter 8: Old China

Chapter 8: Old China Summary and Analysis

Wolff met Pete Landon when he was in language school. Landon admired Wolff for being a tough young soldier and Wolff didn't mind playing that role for him. He was a foreign service officer who was educated at Harvard and was fluent in several languages. Landon arrived in Vietnam before Wolff. When Wolff was dispatched he spent some time with Landon in Saigon. He lived in a villa with four other civilians who were all erudite and upper class like Landon. After dinner and drink and an intellectual discussion about literature, they decided to go to a bar. They got quite drunk and after they returned, Wolff and Landon stayed up while the others crashed. Landon treated Wolff like a little brother, tempting him with cupcakes and other sweets. He kept inferring that he could be better situated in a different assignment.

After the Tet Offensive, Landon visited Wolff at his battalion. Wolff and Benet took him on a tour of the camp. Landon wanted to visit an old contact who lived in a village west of the battalion. The man was retired but had a wealth of information about Vietnam. The road to the village wasn't safe but Landon didn't seem worried. Although Benet privately warned him not to go, Wolff volunteered to accompany him. Wolff loaded Landon's truck with guns and ammunition—just in case. They made their way safely to the village and located Ong Loan's house and soon were sitting across from him on the floor of his living room. The "wise man" that Landon was so eager to see didn't provide any important information; however, he gifted Landon with a china bowl. Landon handed the wrapped up bowl to Wolff and told him to keep it for him and that it was worth a good deal.

On the way back, Landon revealed that he had arranged for Wolff to be transferred up north to what he considered to be a better assignment. Wolff was perplexed. He could have asked him if he wanted to leave his battalion before he made the arrangements. Wolff told him in no uncertain terms that he did not want the transfer. In fact, with less than two months left on his tour, they probably wouldn't want him since it would take longer than that to train him. Landon realized he had to cancel Wolff's transfer. Some time later, Wolff got a message from Landon to send the china bowl to him. Wolff fantasized about smashing the bowl but suppressed the urge.



Chapter 9: I Right a Wrong

Chapter 9: I Right a Wrong Summary and Analysis

Sergeant Benet's tour ended a month before Wolff's. They joined a convoy and went to a bar in the city for a few drinks before he left. The bar was a "cracker" establishment and it was obvious that the patrons didn't like a black man being there. Benet, of course, sensed it and sunk down in his seat. Wolff wanted Benet to know that he had been the smarter of the two and was really the one who was in charge despite their respective ranks. Wolff hated to see him go. Benet told him he'd do fine without him. Wolff wasn't so sure.

It was too late for Wolff to return to My Tho, so he got a hotel for the night. He went to the hotel bar located on the roof overlooking the destruction caused by the Tet Offensive. Wolff got to thinking about how Benet felt uncomfortable at the bar during their last few hours together. He should not have allowed it to have gone on without speaking up. Although he was very drunk, he decided to go back to the bar and have it out with the crackers. Unfortunately, he started a verbal argument back and forth with two rednecks who pummeled him.



Chapter 10: Souvenir

Chapter 10: Souvenir Summary and Analysis

The battalion set up in a house that formerly belonged to a local mandarin. Captain Kale was a newly arriving infantry officer awaiting assignment to a permanent battalion. He would be replacing Wolff until a permanent artillery man could be assigned. Kale hinted that Wolff had not trained the Vietnamese soldiers to have the killer instinct, that he'd babied them. Kale had big plans for the battalion he would eventually be assigned to. Kale was looking for a sling because he had orders to move a howitzer. Kale wouldn't take Wolff's advise to make the transfer in an open field. Kale had no experience in moving such a large weapon and his know-it-all demeanor would soon get him in trouble. He was very argumentative with Wolff and treated him disrespectfully. Finally, Wolff decided to let Kale find out the hard way how not to move a howitzer.

Kale ordered that the copter pickup the howitzer from the center of the village. The Chinook lowered and hovered over the howitzer that Kale was standing on top of. The power of the Chinook's whirring blades was causing a massive dust storm and was collapsing some of the nearby huts. Kale reached for the cable hook but it was just beyond his grasp. The dust was blinding him. He finally linked the sling onto the hook and the Chinook hauled the large gun it away. In doing so, Kale plummeted to the ground and sprained his ankle. It seemed that Kale was sorry for the mess that he caused and for destroying the villagers' homes but the people weren't interested in his attempts to make it up to them.



September 11: The Rough Humor of Soldiers

September 11: The Rough Humor of Soldiers Summary and Analysis

It was his last night in My Tho. The battalion officers were giving him a send-off party. Major Chou had a young woman he claimed was his niece at the party. The girl, Miss Be, served the men drinks. Miss Be whispered to her uncle that Captain Kale was handsome and that she wanted to dance with him. Soon the two were swaying and holding each other tight to the tune of Brenda Lee's, "I'm sorry." Kale was married and had told Wolff he wanted to stay true to his wife—but it looked like he was changing his mind. Major Chou led them to a back room so they'd have more room.

Major Chou toasted Wolff and paid tribute to his skill as a leader and his courage. The other soldiers all made their toasts to him. Captain Kale came running from the back. Lipstick was smeared all over his face. Chou and the other Vietnamese soldiers fell over laughing. Kale demanded to know if everyone knew Miss Be was a guy. Kale wasn't the only one who had a trick played on him that night. The feast that was prepared for Wolff's going away dinner was dog stew—made from Wolff had saved from being roasted.



Chapter 12: Civilian

Chapter 12: Civilian Summary and Analysis

As soon as Wolff stepped off the plane in Oakland, the personnel officer told him if he re-upped for another tour he would be promoted to captain. Wolff was not even tempted. He'd been a soldier for four years, since he was eighteen. Even though he didn't miss the Army, he had to adjust to being a civilian again. He dragged his feet about returning to Washington, DC. His mother and brother and Vera, who broke up with her boyfriend, were all anxious to see him. But he delayed going. He thought about enrolling in college in California but didn't following through with it. There were protesters on the street calling for the end of the war. He got in a fight with a fellow who was making disparaging remarks about him as he walked by.

Wolff surprised his father again. His father wasn't feeling well but after a few stiff drinks he felt better and they went out to dinner. They got drunk and both had hangovers the next morning. His father was sick and stayed in bed all day. Wolff waited on him when he needed something. He liked to be babied. Wolff stocked his pantry with food, cleaned his apartment, and got a new muffler put on his car. It made Wolff feel less useless and brought him closer to his father. Perhaps to harken back to early years, Wolff's father wanted to read the book "The Wind in the Willows," aloud to his son. His father enjoyed reading it and Wolff realized that his father was playing the part of "Toad," the shameless and incorrigible but thoroughly good-hearted character in the children's story. It was a message to Wolff. His father was signaling that though he'd been dishonest and a criminal, he was a kind and decent man.

The days in Manhattan Beach dragged on beyond what Wolff had anticipated. He read during the day and stopped by a local bar in the evenings. There were many hours of just shooting the breeze with his father. The subjects of Vietnam and prison were never broached. Wolff was aware that he was drinking too much. His father only once mentioned his drinking but Wolff stormed out and his father never brought it up again. Wolff had a year's salary in the bank. It would last him a year in which time he could finish his novel. But it wasn't a good plan and would not work out the way he hoped.

Ultimately, Wolff decided to return to DC and see Vera. He told his dad that he wouldn't be going to school in Los Angeles. He'd try to come back and see his dad the next year. His dad took Wolff's \$20 watch off his arm and slid his expensive Heuer chronograph watch over to his son. Wolff did not resist the exchange.

Although the reunion with Vera was exciting, their relationship was not meant to be. After he moved in with her on farm property her family owned, it was obvious that they could not get along. He visited London with friends and stayed on after they left. He was encouraged to apply at Oxford and had four months to prepare for the entrance exams in Latin, French, English history and literature. He was accepted and attended Oxford for the next four years.

Chapter 13: Last Shot

Chapter 13: Last Shot Summary and Analysis

Wolff read up on George Orwell because his son was writing a paper on him. The line, "It is a great thing to die in your own bed, though it is better still to die in your boots," (p. 219) struck a note with Wolff. It was his experience in Vietnam that some guys didn't die in their boots, they were literally blown out of them. It made him think of his friend Hugh Pierce and all the things in life he missed by dying so young. It was Hugh who had started the "stroll" and singing "My Girl" as they parachuted out of the copters. He remembered how Hugh turned to him just before he jumped and asked, "Are we having fun yet?" (p. 221) and then he was gone.



Characters

Tobias Wolff

Tobias Wolff is a famous and successful author. Although he always had a passion for writing, the way his early life began showed little promise that he would ever become successful at anything. His father had abandoned his family, something that hurt Wolff the rest of his life. His father was a liar and a thief. Was that to be his legacy as well? Although he was bright, he flunked out of school and wound up on as a crew member of a private survey ship. In those days he drank and partied too much and after one night of bingeing missed the departure of his ship.

Not wanting to disappoint his mother yet again, he decided to do something to make her proud and to prove that he had value and worth. He decided to join the army. His decision to enlist came at a time when the war in Vietnam was raging. He knew the risk he was taking but after he eventually was dispatched to Vietnam, he was not prepared for the fear, self-doubt and regret that he experienced. But it was too late and there was no turning back. Wolff served his tour in Vietnam and then went through the adjustment of returning to civilian life with people who had no concept of the horrors that were taking place across the globe.

Wolff is able to reunite with his father and develop a relationship with him, an experience that gives him some resolution. Although he stumbles around for a while when he returns, he eventually finds himself. He earns a degree from Oxford and becomes a famous and successful writer—like his hero Ernest Hemingway. But recollections of war are never far from his consciousness and will haunt him forever.

Tobias Wolff's Father

Tobias Wolff's father was a conman and a thief. He was serving time in prison for fraud when his son was contemplating going to war—a big decision for an eighteen-year-old to make alone. The elder Wolff had abandoned his family years before and had lost contact with his sons. Tobias was ashamed of his father and would often respond that his father was dead if anyone asked about him.

Tobias played a surprise visit to his father in Manhattan Beach, California, before he was shipping out to Vietnam. Perhaps Tobias thought he'd never get a chance again to see his father again. After all, it was in the papers and on the news everyday how many young soldiers were losing their lives. Maybe this was his last chance to look his father in the eye and perhaps confront him about the missing years, the years he had denied him a father.

It was obvious that Tobias' father was carrying around quite a bit of guilt about his behavior himself. One clue was that he didn't talk about leaving his family, couldn't talk it. It was too emotional, too shameful. In an effort to recapture and explain the lost time



with his son, he insisted on reading "The Wind in the Willows," out loud to his grown military son. He was "Toad" from the book. The character that was "shameless and incorrigible, but...good-hearted" (p. 202). Without saying the words, his father was trying to say he was sorry and that he deserved forgiveness because deep-down he was really a good guy. He took Tobias' \$20 watch off his arm and exchanged it for his own expensive Heuer chronograph. It symbolically replaced all those missing gifts over all those many years.

Sergeant Benet

Sergeant Benet was a black soldier who served with Tobias Wolff in the same battalion in the Mekong Delta. They became good friends and together arranged to exchange a Chicom for a 27" TV set so they could watch a "Bonanza" special on Thanksgiving Day.

Hugh Pierce

Hugh Pierce became Wolff's best friend in the army. They trained together in jump school in North Carolina. Wolff was devastated when he discovered Pierce's name on a list of those killed in action.

Captain Kale

Captain Kale was temporarily replacing Wolff after his tour ended. He was an aggressive, know-it-all who almost destroyed a village when transferring a howitzer to a Chinook.

Major Chou

Major Chou was a commander in the south Vietnamese Army. He arranged for a bizarre going away celebration when Wolff's tour of duty in Vietnam was ending.

Vera

Wolff was engaged to Vera, a girl he met in Washington, DC, during his language training. She had emotional problems and when Wolff returned after serving in Vietnam, their relationship did not last.

Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway was Wolff's idol. Since Hemingway had served in the military, it compelled Wolff to enlist.



Doc Macleod

Doc Macleod was a newly graduated surgeon. He volunteered to serve in Vietnam so that he could gain more experience in performing surgery.

Stu Hoffman

Tobias Wolff spent his last few days with Stu Hoffman, a fellow recruit, in San Francisco. They dined with Stu's father who was totally against the war and urged his son not to go to Vietnam even though he was ordered to do so.



Objects/Places

Pharaoh's Army

The title, "In Pharaoh's Army," is an oblique Biblical reference to the east wind that blows in the pharaoh's army and destruction from the evil war.

Washington D.C.

Tobias Wolff was assigned to a year in language school in Washington, DC, where he would learn the Vietnamese language in preparation for his tour as an adviser in Vietnam.

North Carolina

Tobias Wolff went to jump school in North Carolina. It was during this training that he met Hugh Pierce who turned out to be his best friend during his military years.

Vietnam

Vietnam was in an on-going raging Civil War when the US began sending advisers and troops in during the 1960s.

The Mekong Delta

Tobias Wolff was sent as an adviser and Special Forces officer to the Mekong Delta in southern Vietnam.

My Tho

My Tho was the closest Vietnamese city to Tobias Wolff's battalion which was located in the Mekong Delta.

Tet Offensive

The Tet Offensive was a bloody massacre waged by the Vietcong on the villages and battalions that were located in the Mekong Delta during the Vietnam War. Wolff's battalion was attacked but he lived through it.



San Francisco

Prior to shipping overseas to Vietnam, Wolff and a fellow recruit spent their final carefree days stateside in San Francisco.

Manhattan Beach

Tobias Wolff had been estranged from his father for many years. When he returned to the states after his tour in Vietnam, he spent several weeks with his father in his Manhattan apartment where they forged out a new relationship.

Howitzer

Wolff was an artillery specialist and one of his main responsibilities was the transfer of the large howitzer gun, a cannon-like weapon, from one location to another.



Themes

Abandonment

Tobias Wolff suffered for much of his formative years from the abandonment of him by his father. Abandonment is regrettably a common issue that faces families in today's world. As is often the case, Wolff's mother stuck by her children while their father took off. Wolff struggled with the absence of his father for many years. It was one of the compelling reasons that he joined the army. He wanted to not only prove to the world and perhaps most importantly to himself, that he had value and purpose. His father was a conman and a thief and was serving time in prison during the delicate years that Tobias the boy was becoming Tobias the man.

Like many boys in similar circumstances, he would have loved to seek his father's guidance about what to do with his life. Even though Stu Hoffman's father was obnoxious and overbearing, Wolff had to be impressed and a bit envious that Mr. Hoffman was so concerned about his son going to war that he told him to go AWOL rather than face the possibility of death. But where was Wolff's father? Why wasn't he there by him to worry about his safety? Life wasn't fair. Wolff had a dream the night before he left for Vietnam. He fantasized that the fathers of the recruits on the bus who were heading for their departure point for Nam attacked the bus and rescued their sons. But it was just a dream. Wolff's father had already let him go many years before.

Wolff showed his maturity when he reached out to his father after his tour in Vietnam ended. His father was sick so Wolff took care of him. It was a role reversal that Wolff seemed to like, seemed to need. The two men forged a new relationship although the missing years could never be replaced. But thanks to the younger Wolff's emotional development, he was able to reach out to the man who had left him so many years before allowing both to find some measure of resolution.

Coming of Age

Like literally millions of young people, Tobias Wolff survives a less than perfect childhood and arrives in adolescence damaged and uncertain as to his identity and what the future may hold for him. Although Wolff was a bright young man, his shattered home life contributed to his flunking out of school as a teen. Taking a job as a crew member on a private survey ship, Wolff was not accepted by the other more seasoned mates—he was too cheerful and too naïve for their tastes. Even though it wasn't a great job, he even messed that up by getting drunk and missing the ship's departure. The young man couldn't even hold onto a rotten job! Not exactly an exercise in confidence-building.

To avoid upsetting his mother who he had disappointed too many times before in his eighteen years, Wolff decided to join the army. Perhaps his decision was in part, as he



claimed, due to his wanting to show everyone he had value and purpose but perhaps it was also partly a death wish. What did he really have to risk? At eighteen, he was already a failure. Many young people, especially young men, struggle with the difficulty of transitioning from adolescence to adulthood. One way to make that transition is to force it—to put oneself in a place where there are no options - no choices but to grow up. By enlisting, Wolff was giving himself that proverbial slap in the face to himself or the one that says, "Wake up and grow up!"

The discipline of training and the rigors and cruelty of a real live war has its impact on the immature Wolff and challenges him beyond what he was really ready for. It is painfully obvious that he had more maturing to do when he returned to the States. It was an adjustment but the self-worth that he gained propelled him forward into what would be his destiny - that of author, husband, and father.

Surviving a War

It is Thanksgiving Day and the two young soldiers, Lieutenant Wolff and Sergeant Benet, are determined to bring a bit of normalcy and a smidgen of mainland American back into their current lives. In the surreal and foreign world which has become their new reality, the threat to their lives is a constant. Their battalion is in the middle of a rice paddy that is constantly in danger of attack from the brutal Vietcong. The men want to watch a two-hour special airing of the TV series, "Bonanza," and feel it is worth risking their lives to do so. They only have to recall the day before and the day before that when one of their own lost his life.

Although the foregoing is such a simple, relatively insignificant story from a brutal and hated war, it is one that touches the heart. Wolff and Benet did not really want to be there in the jungle as targets for the enemy. No one would. However, they served their country and their country's leaders decided to participate in the civil war that was raging in Vietnam. It was not their decision to be there. They were dispatched, ordered. They could not overrule the decision nor could they disobey it for fear of incarceration and shame.

These men risked their lives everyday. On this day, this day that America was saying thanks for all its blessings, these two obscure soldiers were seeking just a measure of normalcy. Their method of achieving it was in their ability to watch a favorite American show with the rest of the country and just like they would if they were home. But they were also adamant that when they watched the show, it would not be on their black and white TV that had terrible reception, it would be on a large-screen color TV. It was worth risking their lives over. They would be able to enjoy their program that day for there might not be a tomorrow waiting for them.

Style

Perspective

"In Pharaoh's Army, Memories of the Lost War," is the autobiographical account of writer Tobias Wolff's year in Vietnam as a Special Forces officer. It is, therefore, told in the first person narrative. No one could be a better choice to write about Wolff's memories of his military service and its aftermath than the man himself since he, of course, actually experienced the events and because he is an accomplished and successful writer.

Although Tobias Wolff was fortunate enough to survive the war, he was a witness to the unspeakable cruelty and losses of the "lost war." His account brings a fresh view of an oft told story. The reader gets inside Wolff's mind to learn that even a Special Forces officer who was deemed by his commanders to have "command presence" had self-doubt and fear and regret that he chose to serve. It is an honest account of his experience and he does not try to portray himself as a hero or brave soldier. The writer in him takes in everything. He observes and watches as the war takes place before his eyes - it often comes too close for comfort but he manages to survive.

Wolff's writing credentials are above reproach. He has written other memoirs including "This Boy's Life," which won the Los Angeles Times 1989 Book Award. His other books include "The Barracks Thief" which is a short novel and the winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award.

Tone

"In Pharaoh's Army, Memories of the Lost War," by Tobias Wolff is written in an introspective tone that recalls the author's year in Vietnam in the midst of the country's raging civil war. His recollections summon a blend of the tragic and the absurd and his tone is appropriate in his description of both. He speaks of his desolation when he sees in a random newspaper article that his best friend from recruit training is dead. His reaction is one of sadness blended with outrage.

His friend was just a young man who was vital and fun and full of life. He was the man in paratrooper training who danced the "stroll" to the open hatch and sang "My Girl" in falsetto as he leaped off the copter. Now, he was dead? Dead? How could that be? And, Wolff recalled thinking, if that is true then he could be next for he stood beside him so many times. Would he stand beside him in death as well? Many years later when Wolff was a famous and successful author, he recalls the same young friend and is saddened thinking of how much his friend missed out on in life. Wolff expresses in tone and words that his friend's death still haunted him and that it would forever.

In contrast to passages such as the many that describe the tragedy and cruelty of war, there are accounts of the crazy, funny things that could only happen under the bizarre circumstances in which Wolff found himself. When his battalion is holding a going away



celebration to mark the end of Wolff's tour of duty in Vietnam, the Vietnamese colonel he worked with arranged for a transvestite to pose as his niece. When she takes the new captain who is macho and overbearing into the next room for some "privacy," he comes bursting out of the room whining and demanding to know if everyone knew the "niece" was a guy.

The infrequent comedy juxtaposed against the frequent comedy is illustrative of how man copes with the worst in life. A little comedy eases the pain although it never eradicates it. But it makes it a bit more bearable.

Structure

"In Pharaoh's Army, Memories of the Lost War," by Tobias Wolff is an autobiographical account of the author's time serving in the Vietnam War and the impact it had on him as he attempted to readjust to civilian life. The book is divided into three parts. Part One, which has six chapters, covers his days before joining Army Special Forces and the circumstances and events that led to his deciding to enlist. The chapters cover Wolff's adjustment to the army as a green recruit and his struggles with self-doubt and fear.

Part Two, which has five chapters, begins with the Tet Offensive and portrays Wolff as a more seasoned soldier whose maturity and development result in a more cynical and wizened young man. The writer in him observes the absurdities of war and its surrealism. It was an experience of a life-time but it is obvious in this section that he is anxious to end his tour. When he is offered a promotion from lieutenant to captain to re-enlist, he is not even tempted.

Part Three, which has two chapters, describes Wolff's life after his tour in Vietnam has ended. Although he is grateful that his commitment has ended, his return to civilian life is bittersweet as the aftermath of a brutal and chaotic war maintains a grasp on him. His experience, in fact, haunts him for the rest of his life. Years after the war as he helps his son with a school paper, the slightest reference summons back its horrors. A line from a famous author's work recalls to him the cruel losses of war and rips the scar off a part of him that he knows will never heal.



Quotes

"I'd seen a two-and-a-half-ton truck blown right off the road by one of those [land mines] just a few vehicles ahead of me in a convoy coming back from Saigon" (Chapter 1, p. 4).

"My failure of nerve took another form. I wanted out, but I lacked the courage to confess my incompetence as the price of getting out. I was ready to be killed, even, perhaps, get others killed, to avoid that humiliation" (Chapter 1, p. 8).

"The men I'd respected when I was growing up had all served, and most of the writers I looked up to - Norman Mailer, Irwin Shaw, James Jones, Erich Maria Remarque, and of course Hemingway, to whom I turned for guidance in all things" (Chapter 2, p. 44).

"We were agreed that the world was a comical place, and that we'd been put here for the sacred purpose of being entertained by it" (Chapter 2, p. 55).

"I was inclined to regard every day I got through alive as a close call" (Chapter 4, p. 86).

"Like resurrection of the body, what're they going to do if you get blown up—find every little part of you and stick it all back together? What if's part of you is in one country and the rest of you is in some other country?" (Chapter 5, p. 103).

"It was a relief not to have to look into his face anymore, into his terrible sadness. We didn't say a word" (Chapter 6, p. 117).

"They knew that once they were among the people we would abandon our pretense of distinguishing between them. We would kill them all to get at one" (Chapter 7, p. 140).

"He called me sir. He found work for us to do when there didn't seem to be any and somehow let me know what orders I should give him to preserve the fiction of my authority" (Chapter 9, p. 162).

"My father was Toad. He wasn't playing Toad, he was Toad, and not only Toad, the audacious, Toad the shameless and incorrigible, but, as the story gave occasion, good-hearted Toad, hospitable Toad, Toad for whom his friends would risk their very lives" (Chapter 12, p. 202).

"How can you judge the man you were now that you've escaped his circumstances, his fears and desires, now that you hardly remember who he was? And how can you honestly avoid judging him?" (Chapter 12, p. 208).

"And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell; and great was the fall of it" (Chapter 12, p. 216).



Topics for Discussion

What was a big difference between the Vietcong and the soldiers of the North Vietnam Army? Who invaded Wolff's battalion during the Tet Offensive?

What were the compelling reasons that drove Tobias Wolff to join the Armed Forces? How was his admiration for Ernest Hemingway and other writers a contributing factor?

How did Wolff's relationship with his father impact his life? How did his feelings of uncertainty and abandonment impact him personally and influence the choices he made?

What was strange about Wolff's going away party when his tour of duty ended? What did they eat? Who served them drinks?

What problems did Wolff have in readjusting to civilian life? Why did he stay with his father after returning state-side? What could have been reasons for his not returning to DC to see his mother and brother?

Why did Wolff want to renew his relationship with Vera? What caused the end of their relationship and what positive move did he make after it was over?

How did Wolff's father try to make up the missing years with his son? What subtle and not so subtle things did he do to try to convince his son that he was a good man/father without talking directly about it? What was the significance of his reading the "Wind and the Willows" out loud to his grown son?