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CHALLENGING THE LAW OF COURAGE AND
HEROIC IDENTIFICATION IN TIM O'BRIEN'S *IF I
DIE IN A COMBAT ZONE* AND *THE THINGS THEY
CARRIED*



In his autobiographic text, *If I Die in a Combat Zone: Box Me up and Ship Me Home*, and in his novel, *The Things They Carried*, Tim O'Brien questions the presumed sanctity of the oldest male law. Courage and masculinity, so-called "professionalism," the "old order" (*If I Die* 192), grace under pressure, or the collective male psyche could, O'Brien writes, blind a man into stupidity during the Vietnam War. Not that he could always rely on published information or even rationally determine a wise course in the call of duty, but a citizen had the obligation to discover whether business leaders, politicians, and military officers had moral, legal, and therefore truly evident causes for sanctioning violence in Vietnam. Blind or obsessive duty for the sake of honor, God, and country might be bravery to a fault, or nothing more than "manliness, crudely idealized" (*If I Die* 142).

Courage is only one part of virtue, O'Brien explains, alluding to the warnings of Plato. Courage cannot be separated from wisdom, temperance, and justice. Once a man sheds heroic identification and merit deeds; once he refuses either to compromise his morality, to kill illegally, or to entrap himself in the futile sacrifice of "a war fought for uncertain reasons" (*If I Die* 135); once he seeks inwardly and deliberately for the meaning of courage (an obligation more frightening and dangerous than prescriptive duty), he escapes mechanical bravery and the spiritual death that blind conscription can produce. That is, the soldier who responds not to what he really believes but to the expectations of indoctrinated parents, small-town neighbors, sergeants,

and lieutenants is charged, O'Brien writes, with the passion, the ignorance "merely" of "a well-disguised cowardice" (*If I Die* 135).

Throughout gender history, men have been pressured to react to deadly crisis according to the sacred rules of a male honor code. From Odysseus to King Arthur, from Ulysses to George Washington, and from Aeneas to Norman Schwarzkopf, clearly the most widely accepted values of integrity, dignity, respect, self-respect, valor, and thus unquestioned masculinity hinge upon a commissioned response to fear and duty. Rational control over the emotion of fear or doubt; strength not only of body but also of mind—the tangential strength, that is, of the gifted athlete and military wizard; appropriate aggression fed by a competitive spirit; full-pitch confidence to win against overwhelming odds; and utter loyalty to duty, to God, to country, to family, and to friends collectively define the classic male hero. Here is the meaning of inventiveness, resilience, and endurance in the male universe. Here is the legendary crisis crusher, the icon of national and international glory and fame, the Captain, my Captain of moral common sense and duty, the human bush hog cutting the memorial path to higher truth. "It's the old story," Major Callicles insists in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. "Guts to stand up for what's right. . . . It's not standing around passively hoping for things to happen right; it's going out and being tough and sharp-thinkin' and *making* things happen right" (194-195). Clearly, undaunted courage lies at the heart of this "crucible of men" and epic "events" (22-23).

A "blond, meticulously fair, brave, tall, [and] blue-eyed" Captain Johanson would be recognized traditionally and yet blindly as his "nation's pride" for his classic masculinity when in "the steady, blood-headed intensity of Sir Lancelot" (*If I Die* 131, 144) he charges across a rice paddy to kill a Vietcong soldier nearly at point-blank range. Did he act for the benefit or the safety of his platoon? Was his deed an act of self-sacrifice? Was this an "ag-ile, mo-bile, and hos-tile" man "resigned to bullets and brawn" (*If I Die* 44, 91)? Or was this mission nothing more than an adrenalin rush—not bravery, not courage really, but mindless aggression? "It's the charge, the light brigade with only one man" sailing neither with fear nor with regret into harm's way, O'Brien cautions, that typically comes to mind "first" in the classification of heroes. Men who charge the enemy despite their

fear of death “are remembered as brave, win or lose.” Here are the sacred heroes forever tall, true, and tough— forever rough, ready, and rugged— and men like Johanson confess that they would “rather be brave” in this way “than almost anything” else in life. These men are truly “heroes forever” in war history and in literature, but we must not conclude that “courage” presupposes the bloody “charge” (*If I Die* 131).

“Courage is nothing to laugh at, not if it is proper courage and exercised by men who know what they do is proper” (133), O’Brien writes in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, arguing that if we are not thinking, we are not human. If we are not thinking, by extension we are not brave in the human dimension. “Proper courage is wise courage,” O’Brien explains, alluding to Plato’s dialectic of noble bravery in “Laches.” “It’s acting wisely, acting wisely when fear would have a man act otherwise. It is the endurance of the soul in spite of fear— wisely” (133).

Mindless charge has its place in war— indeed, force can generate the power necessary to win a deadly conflict. But we must not confuse crude aggression with the noble cause enlivened by courage. Doing the best that any individual can do, according to his own conscience, keeps common sense and meaning in the acts of courage. Routine physical acts, the thing to do at the time, raw valor, doing what everyone else is doing to avoid shame, acting bravely “out of a spirit of righteousness . . . necessity . . . resignation” (*If I Die* 45), merely following orders— is that acting gallantly? What might be classified or even decorated with the Congressional Medal of Honor as courageous mentality could like the “endless march” of duty honestly be reduced to a physical response to stressful experience with “no volition, no will, because it was automatic, it was anatomy . . . a kind of inertia, a kind of emptiness, a dullness of desire and intellect and conscience and hope and human sensibility” (*Things* 15).

Human courage comes not from the hypothalamus, not from the anterior pituitary or adrenal glands, and not from any other direct or indirect influence on a fight-or-flight response to stress, including the central nervous system and the testicles, but from the clear thinking cortex of the brain. “Men must *know* what they do is courageous,” O’Brien argues in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*— that is, “they must *know* it is right, and that kind of

knowledge is wisdom and nothing else" (137). Be it Plato's rationalism or Heidegger's and Sartre's existentialism, acting knowingly and thoughtfully is the human condition.

Within this self-limiting vision of courage, O'Brien hesitates to celebrate many brave men. "Either they are stupid and do not know what is right," including one Alpha Company soldier who had no thoughts about his participation in the war—certainly, no high thoughts about morality or politics—and who only wanted to get out of Vietnam alive. "Or they know what is right and cannot bring themselves to do it. Or they know what is right and do it, but do not feel and understand the fear that must be overcome" (*If I Die* 137). Holding ground on principle, or for no other reason than to hold it, as in the example of a cow taking countless rounds from O'Brien's company in a free-fire zone, is neither courage nor endurance. It is mortal stupidity.

Of course, O'Brien is not the first writer to challenge the law of courage, warning that mindless assault, even for honorable causes, loses the human dimension of bravery. Although Hemingway vehemently opposed the psychoanalytic view popular in his day that each individual suffers a point at which his mind or body will break down under pressure, Colonel Lum Edwards explained that even during the most frightening combat of the 1944 Hurtgen campaign Hemingway was never "impressed by reckless bravado." While he "admired the man who could see clearly what was necessary to do and had the courage to do it, regardless of the percentage of risk involved," never did Hemingway identify "raw courage," or suicidal aggression, as honorable or even as desirable "unless it was the only way of getting the job done." Impressed by Hemingway's love of direct action over diction, Edwards concluded that his friend practiced his honor code sincerely each of his eighteen days in Hurtgenwald:

I never saw him act foolishly in combat. He understood war and man's part in it to a better degree than most people ever will. He had an excellent sense of the situation. While wanting to contribute, he knew very well when to proceed and when it was best to wait awhile. (qtd. in Baker 435)

Despite the attractive filter that Hemingway placed on courage—essentially, that a life-threatening event in war (or in any deadly crisis) is merely a test, a test not only of courage and endurance but also of dignity—O'Brien notes in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* that simple stoicism is not a consistently adequate measure of bravery under any circumstance in war:

It's too easy to affect grace, and it's too hard to see through it. . . . Grace under pressure means you can confront things gracefully or squeeze out of them gracefully. But to make those two things equal with the easy word "grace" is wrong. Grace under pressure is not courage. (142-143)

If Hemingway had lived under the daily grind of a combat soldier for a year or more, rather than drifting in and out of deadly conflict as a correspondent, the law of averages would have shattered his stoicism and thus his own law of courage, as the ironies, uncertainties, and cruelties of the war theater would contradict any man's inflexible belief.

Shoved or hit in his childhood school yard, any man of Alpha Company would fight. Rather than lose dignity or the appearance of courage, he would scream and snarl and flail the air and flail his enemies in the cruel power and glory of male potency. Indeed, public confessions about the fear of death were more than "bad luck" or "the ultimate self-fulfilling prophecy," all of which was strictly "taboo" (*If I Die* 138) for any soldier in any combat platoon during the Vietnam War. The collective male honor code precludes the contemplation of fear. Admitting fear is simply illegal or shameful in the male universe. The men of Alpha Company were nurtured in the same laws of masculinity as any other soldier in any other war. A man must not cry. He must not whine or complain. Worse, he must not lose control over his emotions or run in the heat of crisis. He must at least wear the mask of bravery in all conflict. The burden of fear and the shame that he would have to suffer if he let it creep into his face haunted even the toughest soldier of Alpha Company. Everyone "carried the common secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide." Certainly, under the crushing weight of stress, violence, and ordnance, the male

role "was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down." Carrying "the soldier's greatest fear," the terror not of death but "the fear of blushing," the men of Alpha Company "were too frightened to be cowards." No high "dreams of glory or honor" threatened their dignity, merely "the blush of dishonor." They might even sneer at death in order not to be embarrassed by it. Indeed, men "died so as not to die of embarrassment" (*Things* 20-21). Here we see to what extent soldiers are driven in war, the bright center stage of the collective male psyche, not only by the Darwinism of androgen, testosterone, and adrenaline that inflames their aggressive spirits but also by the far more imperial grip of social Darwinism.

The "secret" to success in all crises, Bill brags to Jake in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, is "never be daunted." Of course, we can presume that Bill has been frightened by the violent experiences that any boy or man must endure in social reality, but he must always be politically correct, and thus he will not show his fear. "Not in public. If I begin to feel daunted I'll go off by myself" (73). The silly Lion believes that he will be king over the forests of Oz if he develops not heart and not mind but courage. Ironically, Juno fails to realize in Virgil's *Aeneid* that men value courage over life and safety; thus, her effort to save Turnus from certain death in fated battle with Aeneas only frustrates the man beyond either the fear or the pain of death. "The horror of it!" Turnus shrieks, realizing that he has fled the battlefield in pursuit not of his rival but only of an apparition of Aeneas. Here for the classic soldier is "a fault so grave," a "disgrace" and "shame" so unforgivable and "terrible" (271-272), that only Juno can restrain her mortal from instantly killing himself on his own sword or foolishly attempting to swim back to land in order to regain his dignity in the heat of war.

In order to protect themselves from shame and forbidden fear, some soldiers in Alpha Company "carried themselves with a sort of wistful resignation." Other soldiers wore the masks of "pride or stiff soldierly discipline or good human or macho zeal." All of them were inwardly "afraid of dying," the bravest leaders like Captain Johanson and the toughest grunts like Rat Kiley, "but they were even more afraid to show it" (*Things* 19).

"All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth," O'Brien

writes— that is, “bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit.” Alan Ladd and Humphrey Bogart had impressed O’Brien’s childhood dreams in the formidable way in which a hero responds to crisis. In his impressionable childhood, O’Brien incubated the belief that he “would simply tap a secret reservoir” of his “moral capital” (*Things* 43) and conquer mounting evil as if he were the new generation’s Frederick Henry, Captain Vere, or Shane (*If I Die* 139). However, the “old image” of himself “as a man of conscience and courage” (*Things* 60) collided with the Darwinian forces of the Vietnam War. Would his decision to go either to Canada where he could live according to his conscience or to Vietnam where he would answer his call to duty despite his conscience result in an honest act of courage? If he did succumb to national pride, would he find the path to truth and honor promised by his culture or merely kill the citizen’s obligation to follow his inner voices in matters of political dispute?

Despite respected warnings from Ezra Pound that soldiers have entrapped themselves in war “from fear of weakness” or “from fear of censure” (qtd. in O’Brien, *If I Die* 37), or from fear of not being manly, and despite O’Brien’s research into the political contradictions of Ho Chi Minh, the Gulf of Tonkin, the Geneva Accords, SEATO, and the division, if not the “moral confusion,” among “smart” American politicians who “could not agree on even the most fundamental matters of public policy,” O’Brien suffered the gnawing pressure to abandon his belief “that you don’t make war without knowing why” (*Things* 44). This “moral split,” he explains, caused him to experience “a kind of schizophrenia” (*Things* 48), even to the degree of hallucinating the faces and voices of his parents, his hometown friends, alien neighbors and civic leaders, Civil and World War veterans, high school cheerleaders, his best friend who died in her childhood, a memory of his cowboy hat and mask, Jane Fonda, Gary Cooper, and a myriad of other polar impressions. Although the events “On the Rainy River” are invented in *The Things They Carried* only to evoke O’Brien’s confusion and anguish that he more autobiographically expresses in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, the feeling of psychic warfare draws us into a haunting truth:

I couldn't make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me. I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law. I feared ridicule and censure. (*Things* 48)

Cleanth Brooks writes that moral pressure is exerted as "the essential ether" (52) in American small towns. Indeed, aliens to community codes risk the deadly loneliness not only of spoken and unspoken ridicule but also of self-doubt. Besides his mother and father, whose hurt over a son's resolution to go against the stream he could vividly imagine, O'Brien could picture the emotional violence of town leaders and gossips if they were to discuss his decision to follow his conscience:

My hometown was a conservative little spot on the prairie, a place where tradition counted, and it was easy to imagine people sitting around a table down at the old Gobbler Café on Main Street, coffee cups poised, the conversation slowly zeroing in on the young O'Brien kid, how the damned sissy had taken off for Canada. At night, when I couldn't sleep, I'd sometimes carry on fierce arguments with those people. I'd be screaming at them, telling them how much I detested their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simple-minded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending me off to fight a war they didn't understand and didn't want to understand. I held them responsible. By God, yes, I *did*. All of them— I held them personally and individually responsible— the polyestered Kiwanis boys, the merchants and farmers, the pious churchgoers, the chatty housewives, the PTA and the Lions club and the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the fine upstanding gentry out at the country club. They didn't know Bao Dai from the man in the moon. They didn't know history. They didn't know the first thing about Diem's tyranny, or the nature of Viet-

nameless nationalism, or the long colonialism of the French. (*Things* 48-49)

Of course, O'Brien could not discuss his inner turmoil with anyone so heavily locked into conservative beliefs about men, heroes, and war. And even though he recognized the irony of giving up honest feelings about himself in order to live a life without conflict with people whom he did not know or care about intimately, he could not tolerate the anticipation that these underinformed citizens would condemn him to the leagues of cowards and traitors.

When the heart is squeezed, the intellect cannot always make decisions according to what O'Brien idealizes as "an act of pure reason" (*Things* 54). Rather than make decisions inwardly—that is, trusting an internal barometer and therefore being true to ourselves—O'Brien learned that fear of public condemnation might determine what we finally do. Under the "terrible squeezing pressure" (*Things* 59) that attacks the human conscience, we can succumb to whatever society says that we must do and thus judge ourselves according to what other people say or do "as we make our choices or fail to make them" (*Things* 62). Under the "great worldwide sadness" that "came pressing down" and the "weight" that kept "pushing [him] toward the war" (*Things* 54, 59), O'Brien suffered "a moral freeze" on the Rainy River. "Canada had become a pitiful fantasy," not a solution to the pressure but a "silly and hopeless" dream of escaping his gnawing pressure:

I couldn't decide, I couldn't act, I couldn't comport myself with even a pretense of modest human dignity. . . . Right then, with the shore so close, I understood that I would not do what I should do. I would not swim away from my hometown and my country and my life. I would not be brave. That old image of myself as a hero, as a man of conscience and courage, all that was just a threadbare pipe dream. Bobbing there on the Rainy River, looking back at the Minnesota shore, I felt a sudden swell of helplessness come over me, a drowning sensation. (*Things* 59-60)

Facing the strange and alien moment in his life when he was “ashamed of [his] conscience, ashamed to be doing the right thing” (*Things* 55), ashamed of the philosophical and political convictions that made him doubt his ability to make a moral decision ironically to fight what he believed to be an immoral war, O’Brien confesses that the boiling rivers of “hot, stupid shame” (*Things* 54) finally determined the currents of his inner struggle. National and hometown patriots would not know that they sent a “coward” to fight their war in Vietnam. “It had nothing to do with morality,” good thinking, and courage, O’Brien finally writes. “I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to” (*Things* 62-63).

Although we cannot expect ideal or even rational consistency in the contemplation of courage, O’Brien learned first in the war that raged between his heart and his intellect and then in the bush of the Vietnam War “that manhood is not something to scoff at”—indeed, that “soldiering . . . is something that makes a fellow think about courage, makes a man wonder what it is and if he has it” (*If I Die* 136, 202). In the honesty of mental toughness, no man is a total hero. No man is a total coward. Working toward his own perspective on bravery, O’Brien explodes the popular cliché: “A coward dies a thousand deaths but a brave man only once.” The error in this false assumption, O’Brien explains, is that no man is either “once and for always a coward” or “once and for always a hero.” Operating as a foot soldier in the area of Chu Lai, including the villages of My Khe and My Lai one year after the well-known My Lai Massacre, O’Brien learned the tough reality that in the bush

. . . 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. (*If I Die* 143)

So ambiguous is the truth about courage, so intense and forgivable are the inconsistencies and contradictions of real men in crisis, a classic honor code—no matter how ideally projected, distorted, and perpetuated in gender history—deconstructs its

own pressures in the hideous violence of war. In no literature about the war theater do we come to this intersection of courage more honestly than in the example of Alpha Company struggling under the fire of bullets, duty, pride, and self-preservation in *The Things They Carried*:

For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity. Now and then, however, there were times of panic, when they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn't, when they twitched and made moaning sounds and covered their heads and said Dear Jesus and flopped around on the earth and fired their weapons blindly and cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. In different ways, it happened to all of them. (18-19)

Unlike the inspiring and yet coolly unrealistic cowboys, soldiers, and celebrated heroes of our childhood dreams and movies, taking fire— actually taking rounds intended to kill us, to kill the trembling flicker of perception that stands between us and dusty death— gives us vision about our vulnerability in crisis. We are never more alive, O'Brien is saying in *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and in *The Things They Carried*, than when we are almost dead. War gives us this mirror of our mortality, this truth about our humanity and courage:

Afterward, when the firing ended, they would blink and peek up. They would touch their bodies, feeling shame, then quickly hiding it. They would force themselves to stand. As if in slow motion, frame by frame, the world would take on the old logic— absolute silence, then the wind, then sunlight, then voices. It was the burden of being alive. Awkwardly, the men would reassemble themselves, first in private, then in groups, becoming soldiers again. They would repair the leaks in their eyes. They would check for casualties, call in dustoffs, light

cigarettes, try to smile, clear their throats and spit and begin cleaning their weapons. After a time someone would shake his head and say, No lie, I almost shit my pants, and someone else would laugh, which meant it was bad, yes, but the guy had obviously not shit his pants, it wasn't that bad, and in any case nobody would ever do such a thing and then go ahead and talk about it. They would squint into the dense, oppressive sunlight. For a few moments, perhaps, they would fall silent, lighting a joint and tracking its passage from man to man, inhaling, holding in the humiliation. Scary stuff, one of them might say. But then someone else would grin or flick his eyebrows and say, Roger-dodger, almost cut me a new asshole, *almost*. (19) ☞

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