A Very Old and Terrible Lie: The True Meaning of Courage in Tim O'Brien's Novels

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Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i povijesti

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Vrlo stara i užasna laž: Pravo značenje hrabrosti u romanima Tim O'Briena

Završni rad

Mentor: doc. dr. sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

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Bachelor's Thesis

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Abstract

Tim O'Brien's is an American author who served in the Vietnam war as a foot soldier. O'Brien, through his novels, gives us a recount of his experiences in the war, although most of it is fictionalized. *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* is the author's first literary work, which is a memoir of his military tour in Vietnam, first published in 1971. The author's second novel, *Going After Cacciato* (1979), is pure fiction, which sees the protagonist Paul Berlin chasing after a runaway soldier. Finally, the author's third novel, which is a collection of short stories, published in 1991, is titled *The Thing They Carried*. In all of his works, O'Brien deals with themes such as anxiety, social pressure, fear, courage, and the general meaninglessness and brutality of war. However, as the author himself states, generalizing about the war means missing the point. Although war is hell, and the author does not deny that, war can also be beautiful, as soldiers form bonds of comradeship and brotherhood and as they feel most alive after surviving a firefight. O'Brien's novels are full of such premises which encourage readers to contemplate their lifelong views and beliefs about war and what it actually is. Besides that, O'Brien's novels also give voice to the thousands of soldiers, from both sides, who could not find the courage to do what is moral and right – to refuse to go to war, in spite of the social stigma they would most certainly face. The paper deals with the afore-mentioned premises, turning the entire notion of courage on its head, and it also serves as a critique of American society in the second half of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Tim O'Brien, Vietnam War, *The Things They Carried*, *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home*, *Going After Cacciato*, courage, social stigma

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Introduction

The thesis of this research paper is to explore the underlying theme of Tim O'Brien's three novels that deal exclusively with the Vietnam War and the notion of courage: *If I Die in a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ahip Me Home* (1971), *Coing After Cacciato* (1979), and *The Things They Carried* (1991). More often than not, young boys are taught that being a man means doing one's duty. One such duty is serving the country, even if it means going to war. Tim O'Brien in his Vietnam War trilogy deeply questions how far are individuals willing to go to prove their loyalty to their country, he tackles the idea of a just war, and gives his thoughts on the true meaning of courage. The aim of this paper is to uncover the true meaning of courage in O'Brien's novels and to reveal the author's critique of the Cold War era and American society which sent its young men to a war it did not completely comprehend.

The paper's opening chapter, titled "The Vietnam War," gives a condensed historical background and overview of the conflict which O'Brien was a part of. It deals with French colonialism, the so-called "domino effect" theory and some of the major battles and offensives, such as the battle of Dien Bien Phu and the Tet offensive which changed the course of the war.

Next chapter analyses the American war culture and serves as a critique of the post-World War II American society. In this chapter, the mentality of the American people in the second half of the twentieth century is explored, to see if the average citizen of the United States understood what the conflict was about. Besides serving as a critique of the American society and war culture, this chapter also compares the draft notice to a metaphorical Pandora's box, a source of fear, helplessness, and anxiety.

Before finally analysing what it means to be brave, the chapter "How to Recognize a True War Story" deals with ways to, as the title suggests, differentiate true war stories from false ones. The author gives an insight into what constitutes a true war story and why it is even important to discuss such things.

The subsequent and final chapter of the paper, "The True Meaning of Courage." deals with the main thesis, and, as the title suggests, searches for the true meaning of courage, as stated by the author in his war novels. The chapter delves into the morality of the war and, according to O'Brien, what it means to be brave when faced with the possibility of going to a distant conflict.

The conclusion serves as a final overview of the paper, once again discussing the true meaning of courage according to Tim O’Brien.

1. **The Vietnam War**

1.1 French Colonialism in Vietnam

Before exploring the theme of courage in Tim O'Brien's novels, it is important to give some historical context to his works. As it stands, the Vietnam war is still the most divisive war in US history. The conflict began ten years after the end of World War II. However, the US did not enter the war until the "Gulf of Tonkin incident" in 1965. To be more precise, US military personnel were present in South Vietnam in the form of the so-called "green berets", US special forces who trained ARVN (Army of the Republic of Vietnam) soldiers (Balestrieri).

The roots of the conflict date back to the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century was a period of aggressive colonial imperialism, which was closely tied with the nascent capitalism, a new form of economy based on accumulating capital and joint market ventures. Colonial policies of those times were not based on territorial expansion. Gone were the times when territorial extent was a sign of power and prestige. Rather, owning and controlling large swathes of Earth in the form of colonies was what marked a nation as a colonial superpower. The largest of the colonial empires, and the largest of adversaries, were the British and French colonial empires. The nineteenth century was also a time of extreme nationalism, which culminated in one of the most destructive conflicts in human history, the Great War. Many European nations vied for more colonial expansion, such as the German Empire, which was a strong, economically advanced, and industrious nation. However, it lacked as many colonies as other neighbouring nations, which was a source of great shame on the global geo-political level. The French established their colonies in the far East, which would come to be known as the "French Indochina." "The French colonisation of Vietnam began in earnest in the 1880s and lasted six decades. The French justified their imperialism with a 'civilising mission,' a pledge to develop backward nations" (Jamieson and Hickey). The colony encompassed three Vietnamese regions (Tonkin, Annam and Cochinchina), Guangzhouwan, Cambodia and Laos. The capital of the colony was Saigon, which would become a pivotal battlefield and the primary goal of North Vietnamese forces later in the twentieth century.

Immediately, the French started importing their culture while exporting the raw materials found in Indochina back to France. There, they produced finished products made from the raw materials imported from Vietnam. The French would ship these products back to Vietnam, which, as many other colonies before, proved to be a lucrative market and source of income:

> The peasants' share of the crop – after the landlords, the moneylenders, and the middlemen (mostly Chinese) between producer and exporter had taken their share – was still more drastically reduced by the direct and indirect taxes the French had imposed to finance their ambitious program of public works. Other ways of making the Vietnamese pay for the projects undertaken for the benefit of the French were the recruitment of forced labour for public works and the absence of any protection against exploitation in the mines and rubber plantations . . . (Jamieson and Hickey).

Having established a monopoly over the Vietnamese market, they could adjust prices as they saw fit, while offering products of little to no quality. They also abused the local population, using them as a cheap workforce:

> Millions of Vietnamese no longer worked to provide for themselves; they now worked for the benefit of French *colons* (settlers). The French seized vast swathes of land and reorganised them into large plantations. Small landholder were given the option of remaining as labourers on these plantations or relocating elsewhere. (Llewellyn et al.)

The French considered themselves as "good masters" whose task it was to civilize the lesser races – the so-called "white man's burden." To this end, they started changing the shape of local towns and cities, erecting buildings in the style of French architecture:

> Colonialism also produced a physical transformation in Vietnamese cities. Traditional local temples, pagodas, monuments, and buildings, some of which had stood for a millennium, were declared derelict and destroyed. Buildings of French architecture and style were erected in their place. (Llewellyn et al.)

French also became the official language, and Vietnamese officials and bureaucrats were expected to have at least a basic grasp of the French language:

> The French "civilising mission" was the transformation of subject peoples into loyal French men and women. Through education and examinations, it was theoretically possible for a Vietnamese to obtain French citizenship, with all its privileges. Yet in reality, the criteria for citizenship were manipulated to ensure that subject citizens never threatened French political power. (Llewellyn et al.)

Life in such terms was hard for the Vietnamese population, hence why so many groups and parties arose to try and rid Vietnam of French colonial rule. The most prominent amongst these was Ho Chi Min, who even attended the Versailles peace talks after the conclusion of World War I, in the vain hopes of gaining international support for overthrowing French rule. He based his convictions on Woodrow Wilson's rhetoric about each nation's right to self-governance. However, this was mostly aimed at the new-found nations which emerged from the rubbles of ex-Austria-Hungary. President Wilson could not offer his support to the Vietnamese people since the USA and France were staunch allies.

After his failure at the Versailles peace talks, Ho Chi Minh spent almost thirty years in exile, not returning to his homeland until the closing years of World War II. During World War II, Vietnam was again occupied, this time, however, by an eastern imperialist invader, imperial Japan. The Vietnamese fought a guerrilla war against the Japanese and were aided by US troops who supplied them with rations and ammunitions. After the capitulation of Japan, Vietnam was occupied by allied forces, the USSR and USA, whose alliance would soon turn to bitter rivalry and open hostility. It was during the 1920s that Ho Chi Minh became a follower of Marxist teachings, whose anti-imperialist sentiments resonated deeply with him: "In June 1925 Ho Chi Minh had founded the Revolutionary Youth League of Vietnam, the predecessor of the Indochinese Communist Party" (Jamieson and Hickey). Through communism, Ho Chi Minh saw a means of uniting his disparate homeland and leading his people to a brighter future. However, the French would not give up their property so easily:

> After 1936, when the French extended some political freedoms to the colonies, the party skilfully exploited all opportunities for the creation of legal front organizations, through which it extended its influence among intellectuals, workers, and peasants. When political freedoms were again curtailed at the outbreak of World War II, the Communist Party, now a well-disciplined organization, was forced back into hiding. (Jamieson and Hickey)

France was utterly humiliated during World War II. The French people suffered an unprecedented military defeat at the hands of the German Wehrmacht. The number one military power of the first half of the twentieth century was defeated in a manner of weeks. As such, their pride was deeply wounded, and the French government would do anything to uphold the dignity of the French empire, which was now experiencing its inevitable decline and twilight years. French rule would be sorely tested, and in the end, Ho Chi Minh and North Vietnamese

forces would succeed in what the global society deemed impossible – defeating the French in a conventional war. To put things into perspective, the French-Vietnamese war was a David vs. Goliath type of conflict. What is even more astonishing, is that fifteen to twenty years later, they were able to inflict the same blow on an even larger enemy – The United States of America.

1.2 The Domino Effect

Although the US forces entered the growing conflict in Vietnam after the Tonkin Gulf incident, the escalation of the war was influenced by the predominant "domino theory." This theory was conceived by the US National Security Council in 1952. President Dwight D. Eisenhower called it the "falling domino" principle ("Domino Theory"). According to this theory, victories of communist regimes across the globe would lead to violent takeovers in neighbouring countries, which would then lead to subsequent takeovers, hence the domino metaphor ("Domino Theory"). The US government feared that, were South Vietnam to fall under the communist regime of the North, the neighbouring countries of Laos and Cambodia would also fall to communism. This way, the entirety of south-east Asia would be engulfed by Marxist ideology, which would soon spread to the northern hemisphere. Time, however, proved that this theory was miscalculated, a vision of the future born out of the paranoia-inducing "Red Scare." "In the early 1950s, American leaders repeatedly told the public that they should be fearful of subversive Communist influence in their lives" ("Red Scare"). Although it could be argued that the Soviet Union and communist China had imperialist intentions, the communist party of North Vietnam under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh simply wanted to unite Vietnam under a single rule and rid the land of foreign invaders.

The escalation of the war in Vietnam came under the presidency of Lyndon B. Johnson, after the assassination of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, who promised his voters he would deescalate the conflict. There is a theory that such a foreign policy was not in the best interest of the US war industry, which could gain a lot of profit if more and more US troops were sent to Vietnam; hence the need for a president who would be willing to escalate the war.

1.3 Major Battles and Offensives

The two most important battles, due to the effect they had on the outcome of the war, are in no doubt the battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954) and the infamous Tet offensive (1968). The battle of Dien Bien Phu due to the fact that North Vietnam was able to achieve the unthinkable – defeat the French in a conventional battle; and the Tet offensive due to the fact that is showed to the world that US forces grossly underestimated the NVA forces and that America would not achieve such an easy victory. The Tet offensive shattered Lyndon B. Johnson's presidency, during which he tried convincing the US citizens that the war in Vietnam was nearing its end.

After the end of World War II, France sought to tighten its grip on the colonies. Their aim was to preserve their nation's dignity and to use the colonies' resources to repair their devastated homeland. However, this time around, the Vietnamese, now under the leadership of Ho Chi Minh and having gained military experience during the Japanese occupation, fought back against the French occupiers. At first it was a guerrilla war, a strategy of hit and run attacks using the local terrain to one's advantage. Using guerrilla warfare tactics, the Vietcong sought to buy North Vietnam enough time to prepare the NVA forces for a conventional war. They were able to achieve that goal by the year 1954, when French troops entrenched themselves in the valley of Dien Bien Phu. They sought to lure the NVA forces into a decisive battle, believing that their superior firepower would win them the war:

> The French plan at Dien Bien Phu failed miserably – Hitler made a similar mistake at Stalingrad – because it hinged on two critical factors: the inability of the enemy to form a siege around the fortress, and a French airlift command successfully delivering sufficient lethal weapons, supplies and troop reinforcements. (Yu)

However, in an unprecedented logistical and military manoeuvre, the NVA forces, with the help of hundreds of thousand civilians, were able to surround the valley of Dien Bien Phu with artillery emplacements in the surrounding jungles and mountains. They started dropping innumerable shells on French positions, which resulted in a massive number of casualties on the French side:

> The battle ended with a humiliating defeat for the French, which brought down the French government, ended French colonial rule in Asia, ushered in America's epic military involvement in the region for decades to come, and fundamentally changed the global geostrategic landscape. (Yu)

After such a devastating defeat, the French had no choice but to agree to peace talks and retreat from Vietnam.

The Tet offensive on the other hand, was a major NVA offensive in the year 1968, which is generally considered a turning point of the war. The NVA wanted to prove both to the US and the rest of the world that it was capable of winning the war through conventional means: "A successful attack on major cities might force the United States to negotiate or perhaps even to withdraw. At the very least, the North Vietnamese hoped it would serve to stop the ongoing escalation of guerrilla attacks and bombing in the North" ("U.S. Involvement"). Although the military planners of the offensive had set their eyes on too many objectives, which doomed the offensive from the start, the offensive had a profound effect on the geo-political situation. "The Tet Offensive played an important role in weakening U.S. public support for the war in Vietnam" ("U.S. Involvement"). The sheer ferocity and coordination of the offensive shook the US troops to its core. The population of the US realised that the war would not be so easily won, that it was meaningless and that their government was wasting away precious lives. One of the reasons why the Americans were so dumbstruck by this massive offensive, was that they grossly underestimated their enemy. "They have no knowledge of their enemy. They have not read the works of Mao Zedong, Karl Marx, or Vladimir Lenin. Instead they believe that American dollars will lead to victory" (Olson and Roberts 75). Massive protests erupted across the US, which would in turn lead to the de-escalation of the conflict and the final withdrawal of US forces from Vietnam: "Within the United States, protests against continued involvement in Vietnam intensified. On March 31, 1968, Johnson announced that he would not seek a second term as president. The job of finding a way out of Vietnam was left to the next U.S. president, Richard Nixon" ("U.S. Involvement"). Many citizens lost their trust in the government, and future US administrations would be careful about the US's role as the policeman of the world.

2. The American War Culture

2.1 "Why are We Sending our Boys out There?"

This paper does not only explore the themes of courage found in the three titular novels, but also serves as a critique of the American "war culture." To understand what war culture entails, we have to look at the background events in American history.

For a relatively young democracy, America has, in its two and half centuries of existence, been in a constant state of war. While no outside force has ever threatened the shores of America, the US government has sent its troops to numerous warzones and theatres of conflict. This is due to the fact that, after the conclusion of World War II, America began to think of itself as the policeman of the world. Prior to World War II, American foreign policy was largely isolationist. The country itself is rooted in war. Since the War of Independence in the eighteenth century, fought to overthrow the British government, there have been numerous wars fought for different reasons. Some were of expansionist nature, like the war fought against the Mexicans, while others were conflicts of ideologies. One such example is the American Civil War, fought between the Union and the Confederacy over the abolishment of slavery. However, there is one key conflict which has, ever since its conclusion, been embedded in the American psyche as the country's finest hour.

World War II was the most devastating conflict in human history. Millions of losses on all sides, European landscape and cities devastated, the prosecution and systematic elimination of European Jews, all of these horrors were wrought upon by the fascist ideology and totalitarian regimes seeking to conquer the world. However, one country emerged out of the conflict unscathed, and went on to become the current global superpower – the United States of America. After the conclusion of World War II, Americans came to believe that ". . . America [had] a mission and that its destiny is not simply to be rich and powerful and big, but to be so for some God-given purpose" (Robertson 25). As mentioned earlier, prior to World War II, US foreign policies were of isolationist nature. There was a general consensus amongst the US population that there was no need for involvement in European wars. Although the US did sell arms and weapons to the allied nations, it mostly kept to its own shores. All of that would change, however, with the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

The attack on Pearl Harbor was orchestrated for several reasons. Imperial Japan sought to expand its domain into the resources-rich south-east Asia and mainland China. To do that, however, they would need to secure themselves against outside threats. The largest threat to

Japan in the Pacific was the US, who could cut off their oil supply and potentially even launch a naval attack on Japan. Hence they sought to give the US a decisive blow and knock them out for good on the Pacific. Pearl Harbor was chosen as the target of their attack, and so the Japanese sent several aircraft carriers to sink the US fleet:

> Pearl Harbor is a U.S. naval base near Honolulu, Hawaii, that was the scene of a devastating surprise attack by Japanese forces on December 7, 1941. Just before 8 a.m. on that Sunday morning, hundreds of Japanese fighter planes descended on the base, where they managed to destroy or damage nearly 20 American naval vessels, including eight battleships, and over 300 airplanes. More than 2,400 Americans died in the attack, including civilians, and another 1,000 people were wounded. The day after the assault, President Franklin D. Roosevelt asked Congress to declare war on Japan. ("Pearl Harbor")

Suffice it to say, the attack did nothing to the military might of the US, except for inflicting a lot of human casualties. The US population was enraged at the loss of life suffered at the hands of Japanese bombers, and the isolationist policy was completely abandoned. The attack had a profound effect on the US population, and droves of young men started enlisting the army.

Unlike so many wars before and after, the Second World War is a conflict that is deeply embedded in the war culture of the United States. It was perceived as a fight between good and evil, "good guys" going to the Pacific and Europe to fight the oppressive totalitarian ideology of fascism. "In our time, World War II has become the archetypical 'good' war, fought for good reasons, and resulting in massive, long-lasting benefits to America and Americans" (Robertson 325). There is a general consensus amongst US citizens that World War II was a just war and a moment of national unity:

> The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, ended the debate over American intervention in both the Pacific and European theaters of World War II. The day after the attack, Congress declared war on Imperial Japan with only a single dissenting vote . . . . Americans enthusiastically supported the war effort. Isolation was no longer an option. (Marshall V.)

Young men from all over the country started enlisting in order to do their duty as their fathers and grandfathers before them. And that is the essence of American war culture. Doing one's duty and upholding the legacy of previous generations. Even World War I, which was a turning

point in history as it completely destroyed the nationalistic mentality of many European nations, did not have the same effect on America because:

> American troops didn't reach France in substantial numbers until the spring of 1918 and went on the offensive only in the war's final months. Their war, once it began, was hard-fought, but by Western Front standards it was brief, mobile, and light in casualties . . . (Hynes 96)

Many characters in O'Brien's novels ruminate over what it means to be brave and consider what it actually means to do one's duty and uphold the values of one's country. O'Brien himself ponders over this fact in both *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*. He expresses his feelings in *Going After Cacciato* as well, although through the novel's main protagonist, Paul Berlin. However, the biggest criticism of American society can be seen in the novel *The Things They Carried*, when O'Brien receives his draft notice.

2.2 The Draft Notice – A Pandora's Box of Fear, Helplessness and Anxiety

Life was easy and prospective for O'Brien before the US involvement in the Vietnam war. He was an upbeat college student who received good grades and had the love and respect of his friends, family, and community. Even after the US sent more troops to Vietnam, O'Brien led a relatively peaceful life of prosperity. The Vietnam war was just a back-thought which had no impact on his personal life. O'Brien could not escape the war, of course, it was a part of every-day discourse, but it did not affect his life in the slightest. He could not imagine himself going to some distant battlefield on the other side of the world and fighting against communists and rice farmers. When it came to politics, O'Brien always considered himself to be on the liberal spectrum. He supported those politicians who advocated an end to the war, like Eugene McCarthy, for example: "The summer of 1968 . . . was a good time for talking about peace and war. Eugene McCarthy was bringing quiet thought to the subject . . . . and some of us tried to help out" (O'Brien, *If I Die* 16). He even partook in student debates against the continuation of the war and wrote articles for the college newspaper on the topic of Vietnam:

> In any case those were my convictions, and back in college I had taken a modest stand against the war. Nothing radical, no hothead stuff, just ringing a few doorbells for Gene McCarthy, composing a few tedious, uninspired editorials for the campus newspaper. Oddly, though, it was almost entirely an intellectual

> activity. I brought some energy to it, of course, but it was the energy that accompanies almost any abstract endeavour; I felt no personal danger; I felt no sense of an impending crisis in my life. (O'Brien, *The Things* 39)

He never imagined he would be one of the many thousands of young men who would receive the draft notice. Suffice it to say, the letter served as a cold shower, and O'Brien could feel the world shattering under his feet.

The draft notice serves as a metaphor of a Pandora's box. A Pandora's box is a mythical font of dark energies, specifically, evils such as sickness or death. In Greek mythology, it was Zeus who tricked Pandora into opening the artifact which contained all of the aforementioned evils, as revenge against Prometheus who stole the knowledge of fire from Olympus and gifted it to mortals. Through the ages, the term "Pandora's box" has come to define sources of great trouble and anguish. In this sense, a draft notice from the US military could be considered a type of Pandora's box. At first, O'Brien did not show any emotions about receiving the letter. It was all just a guise though, as the draft bothered him deeply:

> The draft notice arrived on June 17, 1968 . . . . I remember opening up the letter, scanning the first few lines, feeling the blood go thick behind my eyes. I remember a sound in my head. It wasn't thinking, just a silent howl. A million things all at once – I was too *good* for this war. Too smart, too compassionate, too everything. It couldn't happen. I was above it. (O'Brien, *The Things* 39)

Later on, his college friends, upon learning that he was drafted, asked him what he would do, to which his only response was: ". . . I don't know, [I said] that I'd let time decide" (O'Brien, *If I Die* 17). When asked the same by his father, O'Brien's only response was "nothing" (O'Brien, *The Things* 40). He got a job at a meat factory cleaning blood clots in swine carcasses, but the inevitability of going to the army was eroding away his sanity. The thought of going to war and losing his life was always present in the back of his mind, and time was slowly but inevitably passing by. Summer would soon be over, and he would have to go through basic military training and then be shipped to Vietnam.

Up until that point, O'Brien did not even once think about Canada. He led a life of leisure, and while he might not have loved America as much as some of his more patriotic fellow citizens, he still respected the US and enjoyed the many riches it had to offer. He even acknowledges it himself, that there are certain boons to living in America: a life of comfort, prosperity, education, freedom, and success. Enjoying these benefits indebted him to his

country, and he would soon have to pay that debt by going to war. But he could not bring himself to go to some distant country and wage war in the name of democracy, not when the reasons and justifications for such a war were so unclear:

> I was drafted to fight a war I hated. I was twenty-one years old. Young, yes, and politically naïve, but even so the American war in Vietnam seemed to me wrong. Certain blood was being shed for uncertain reasons. I saw no unity of purpose, no consensus on matters of philosophy or history or law. (O'Brien, *The Things* 38)

As was already mentioned, the American war culture is based on performing one's duty, and that duty was clear during World War II – fight the "bad guys" and win. Here, it was unclear who was fighting who and why. Even O'Brien admits that the war seemed unjust. Afterall, the main goal of the communist party under Ho Chi Minh was not to install communism in Vietnam. The war began as an anti-imperialist fight against colonial oppressors, which makes the entire conflict even more tragic as the United States were also founded on the basis of self-governance and resistance against colonial rule. To be fair, the North Vietnamese troops did commit many war crimes in the war, but so did South Vietnam and even the US troops supporting ARVN. But that does not diminish the fact that the war began in the hopes of Vietnamese people gaining independence. O'Brien realises this and starts to ponder if the war was truly justified. He begins to question whether they were really fighting against communism, what their real objective was and whether it was higher body-count than the enemy. These, and many more, are the questions O'Brien asks himself. The "evils" out of the "Pandora's box", the draft notice, started to slip out and engulf him with emotions of fear, anguish, anxiety, anger, and frustration. This frustration was primarily aimed at the American society. The typical upper-class members of society who did not understand the war yet were willing to send their young men to the metaphorical slaughterhouse:

> 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. (O'Brien, *The Things* 43)

The term slaughterhouse is used as a metaphor for war, but it is interesting to note that the author worked in one of those the summer before being drafted for Vietnam. It could be foreshadowing on the author's part, that he was as a "pig before the slaughter", destined to be shipped to Vietnam and killed in some unmarked paddy.

The society, whose benefits he reaped and which he was a part of, did not understand his plight and the plight of thousands of other boys being shipped to Vietnam. Nobody understood the war, yet to not go to war was a great source of shame. This was due to American mentality which was shaped by previous conflicts and their war culture. They might not have understood the war, but it was still their duty to lead the world in the fight against communism, just like their predecessors before, except it was not them who were fighting, rather, young men who were in most cases barely eighteen. O'Brien broods about this when he says the following:

> The summer conversations, spiked with plenty of references to the philosophers and academicians of war, were thoughtful and long and complex and careful. But, in the end, careful and precise argumentation hurt me. It was painful to tread deliberately over all the axioms and assumptions and corollaries when the people on the town's draft board were calling me to duty, smiling so nicely. (O'Brien, *If I Die* 17)

There is a reason why Vietnam remains the most divisive war in American history. It remains so because it shattered the people's trust for the government and their image of America as the policeman of the world. O'Brien, venting his rage out on the American society, decided to take drastic measures – he tried to escape the war before being drafted.

Although cases of extreme anxiety can be found in both *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*, they are much more subtle in O'Brien's memoirs than in his most recent novel. For example, O'Brien admits that he spent a lot of time thinking about the war, arguing with both himself and his colleagues whether it was a righteous war. He also admits that he chose to go to war in the end. However, readers get the notion that this is due to the lack of energy on O'Brien's part, rather than the soul-crushing anxiety of being ostracized by his community:

> It was an intellectual and physical standoff, and I did not have the energy to see it to an end. I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war. But neither did I want to upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, the

> people I knew, and my own private world. It was not just that I valued that order. I also feared its opposite – inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all. (O'Brien, *If I Die* 22).

In *The Things They Carried*, the author is not so subtle, and he gives the readers a full account of his mental state prior to going to war, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

3. How to Recognize a True War Story

Before the true meaning of courage in O'Brien's novels is analysed, it is important to talk about recognizing a true war story. O'Brien explains this in his third novel on the Vietnam war *The Things They Carried*. However, the author put his own words to the test in one of his previous novels, *Going After Cacciato*.

O'Brien's novels are not the average, run-of-the-mill patriotic war stories. His stories show the full extent of the atrocities and horrors the soldiers had to face. They show the level of psychological trauma every soldier experiences in warzones. Insomnia, death, paranoia, exhaustion, all of these negative things combine to wreak havoc on one's mind. This is most evident in the character of Norman Bowker, which is an alias for O'Brien's real wartime friend and comrade. He is an ex-soldier returning from Vietnam, whose psyche has been destroyed. It is through him that O'Brien exemplifies why sharing war stories is important for veterans, as through sharing their experiences, they are able to mend their minds. Nobody would listen Bowker's stories, which only made his condition worse. That is one of the reasons why O'Brien explains to the readers how to recognize true war stories.

While it is true that wars are horrible events, and O'Brien has no intention of saying otherwise, he also states that war is not pure evil. The author states that both sides, the ones who demonize war and the ones who glorify it, are wrong. He goes on to say that that is usually how one can recognize when a war story is false. Because even in such tragic and devastating circumstances, real beauty can be found. The interactions the soldiers have with civilians, the bonds of comradeship between soldiers, the visual beauty of firefights: fighter jets flying overhead, artillery emplacement bombarding enemy positions, tracers rounds popping-off in every direction is a visual stimuli, a glorious sight:

> War is hell, but that's not the half of it, because war is also mystery and terror and adventure and courage and discovery and holiness and pity and despair and longing and love. War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead. (O'Brien, *The Things* 76)

Usually, true war stories will contain elements of both horror and beauty, and such stories will sound unbelievable, but a bullet-proof way of recognizing true war stories, is if the listener does not feel the need to know if the war story actually happened or not. The same goes for O'Brien's stories. The reader cannot be completely sure if one story is true or not, however, that is not what matters. What matters is what the story is trying to convey. War stories do not

have a point, rather, they convey the soldiers' emotions, their grief and most fond memories. "Often in a true war story there is not even a point, or else the point doesn't hit you until twenty years later, in your sleep, and you wake up and shake your wife and start telling the story to her, except when you get to the end you've forgotten the point again" (O'Brien, *The Things* 78). It is hard for people who have not experienced war to understand such things. Like O'Brien says: "You can tell a true war story by the questions you ask. Somebody tells a story, let's say, and afterward you ask, 'Is it true?' and if the answer matters, you've got your answer" (O'Brien, *The Things* 79). O'Brien is furious when talking about his deceased friend Curt Lemon. Curt Lemon was a member of the 23rd infantry division who died when he stepped on a rigged mortar round. His death haunts the rest of the unit, who cannot get over it, although nobody speaks about it. He becomes just another wasted grunt. He recounts the story of Rat Kiley, Lemon's closest friend, gruesomely shooting a water buffalo to death, to an old lady. Although the ordeal is gruesome, it is Kiley's way of dealing with the trauma of losing a close friend. And the old lady listening misses the point, which angers O'Brien:

> Now and then, when I tell this story, someone will come up to me afterward and say she liked it. It's always a woman. Usually it's an older woman of kindly temperament and humane politics. She'll explain that as a rule she hates war stories; she can't understand why people want to wallow in all the blood and gore. But this one she liked. The poor baby buffalo, it made her sad. Sometimes, even, there are little tears. What I should do, she'll say, is put it all behind me. Find new stories to tell. I won't say it, but I'll think it. I'll picture Rat Kiley's face, his grief, and I'll think, *You dumb cooze*. Because she wasn't listening. It wasn't a *war* story. It was a *love* story. (O'Brien, *The Things* 80, 81).

The readers do not care if *Going After Cacciato* is real or not. It is known that it is fictional, but that is not what matters. What matters is the message it is trying to convey, and this makes it a true war story.

4. The True Meaning of Courage

4.1 Being a Man – What is the Moral Thing to do?

If I Die in a Combat Zone, *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried* are not typical, patriotic war stories. They are not even so much about the war itself. The novels are not recounts of vicious firefights, enemy patrol ambushes or charges into enemy lines. They are about human nature, the desire to live and the desire to be brave. The novels are an opus on courage and what it actually means to be courageous. They are collections of stories on the horrors and beauty of war and how to recognize true war stories. And it is in *The Things They Carried* that the author deconstructs decades, even centuries of lies. Lies about what true courage is.

Tim O'Brien gives us two accounts of his attempts to escape the war. The first is given in *If I Die in A Combat Zone*, where he plans to escape to Sweden, and the second in *The Things They Carried*, where he plans to escape to Canada. It cannot be determined for sure which of the two stories is true, however, the truth might be in the middle. O'Brien did plan to go to Canada in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, but from there he would have taken a plane to Ireland and then to Sweden. In *The Things They Carried* O'Brian drives up to the Canadian border but does not cross it. It could be that, while *If I Die in a Combat Zone* gives us the technical details of his plan to escape the war and how it would go, *The Things They Carried* deals with the psychological trauma he and many others had to experience before being shipped to Vietnam.

Although there are many parts in O'Brien's novels where the author talks about courage, for now, the part of the novel *The Things They Carried* where O'Brien stays at a lodge near the Canadian border for several days will be analysed. As was explained before, the draft notice O'Brien received was a source of great distraught for the young man. The thought of going to Vietnam weighed heavily on O'Brien's mind, and he sought ways to escape his fate. He started pondering over the righteousness of the war, the hubris of the American society and most importantly, Canada. Canada had no place in the boy's mind up until that point. He had lived a life of comfort and prosperity, he pursued higher education, he dated attractive girls, he had prospects for a bright future. All that was turned on its head once the draft letter came in. O'Brien cursed himself for not being a pacifist or, as the *Credence Clearwater Revival* band put it, a "Fortunate Son," a son of an upper-class "big-shot" who could get him out of military duty:

> I was a *liberal*, for Christ sake: If they needed fresh bodies, why not draft some back-to-the-stone-age hawk? Or some dumb jingo in his hard hat and Bomb Hanoi button, or one of LBJ's pretty daughters, or Westmoreland's whole handsome family . . . . There should be a law, I thought. If you support a war, if you think it's worth the price, that's fine, but you have to your own precious fluids on the line. (O'Brien, *The Things* 40)

Such everyday anxiety can crush a man's spirit, so O'Brien started weighing things in his heart. He thinks of reasons to justify the war or his escape to Canada. But in the end, it is the fear of social stigma that drives him the most. O'Brien could not bring himself to escape to Canada because he would not be able to look his parents in the eyes, as well as the other members of his hometown. He would have to abandon the life of leisure he had up until now, and that is what bothered him the most, the fear of being ostracized. At one point though, O'Brien comes to a breaking point, he packs up his things, takes the money he has saved-up over the summer and drives up to the Canadian border: "I drove north. It's a blur now, as it was then, and all I remember is a sense of high velocity and the feel of the steering wheel in my hands. I was riding on adrenaline" (O'Brien, *The Things* 44). Before he crosses it, he takes a detour to a nearby tourist's lodge, where he finds understanding and compassion.

It is there, near the Canadian border, that O'Brien meets Elroy Berdahl, the owner of the Tip Top Lodge on the Rainy River. Elroy was just what O'Brien needed. While the world around O'Brien was ignorant of his plights and fears, it was Berdahl's silent demeanour that gave O'Brien a sense of calmness. Although Berdahl never exchanged many words with O'Brien, he saved the young boy. O'Brien writes this in his novels, and thanks the kind old man for all the help and comfort he provided him during some of the darkest moments in his life: "The man who opened the door that day is the hero of my life. How do I say this without sounding sappy? Blurt it out – the man saved me. He offered exactly what I needed, without questions, without any words at all" (O'Brien, *The Things* 46). They dinned and did chores together, in silence. This was what O'Brien needed. Not lectures on the importance of war or doing one's duty. Words were not necessary. The old man, unlike the rest of O'Brien's friends and family in which the author could not confide, understood his fears. His actions talked louder than his words. O'Brien spent six days at the Tip Top Lodge, where he was deciding whether he should flee his country and the war, or whether he should go to Vietnam; in his words: Whether he should be brave and do what is right or be a coward.

The author constantly questions what it means to be brave. According to the Cambridge dictionary, courage is: "The ability to control your fear in a dangerous or difficult situation" ("courage"). It is a generally accepted idea that courage is not the absence of fear, but rather, as the previous definition explains it, the ability to control it. O'Brien tried controlling his fears, but his attempts proved unsuccessful which drove him to a breaking point. It is why he went for the Canadian border. But even in those moment he was still weighing things in his heart. It is why he spent six days at the Tip Top Lodge. But the moment where he would have to choose to be brave or a coward was fast approaching. On his final day at the Tip Top Lodge, Berdahl takes O'Brien on a boat and they go fishing. He drives to a nearby river which makes up the natural border between Canada and the USA. O'Brien could see the other shore; salvation was in his grasp. But O'Brien still could not bring himself to cross to the other sides. Apparitions of his family, friends, neighbours, commanding officers, the Vietcong soldiers he would kill, all of them started appearing before him:

> Chunks of my own history flashed by . . . . A hallucination, I suppose, but it was as real as anything I would ever feel. I saw my parents calling to me from the far shoreline. I saw my brother and sister, all the townsfolk, the mayor and the entire Chamber of Commerce and all my old teachers and girlfriends and high school buddies. Like some weird sporting event: everybody screaming from the sidelines, rooting me on – a loud stadium now. (O'Brien, *The Things* 55)

Berdahl sat there in silence, offering silent comfort to the broken boy. It was then that O'Brien finally cracked. He chose to go to war and to be a coward:

> And what was so sad, I realized, was that Canada had become a pitiful fantasy. Silly and hopeless. It was no longer a possibility. 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. (O'Brien, *The Things* 55)

For centuries, young boys have been taught that brave men go to war for their country, that they do their duty and do what is right. That might have been the case with World War II, however, O'Brien's absurd rises from the fact that the fear of social stigma compelled him to participate in a war against another country's independence:

> All those eyes on me – the town, the whole universe – and I couldn't risk the embarrassment. It was as if there were an audience to my life, that swirl of faces

> along the river, and in my head I could hear people screaming at me. Traitor! They yelled. Turncoat! Pussy! . . . . And right then I submitted. I would go to the war – I would kill and maybe die – because I was embarrassed not to. (O'Brien, *The Things* 57)

This is why O'Brien decided to go to war in the end. The author was afraid of being ostracized by his community and he did not want to lose the benefits he had as a member of US society. O'Brien also did not want to lose the love and respect of his parents, and that is why he chose to answer the draft notice.

4.2 I Would Kill and Maybe Die… Because I was Embarrassed not to

O'Brien masterfully deconstructs centuries of lies of what it means to actually be courageous. He delivers it at a gut-punching level which resonates deeply with his readers. In the author's own words: "If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted . . . then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie" (O'Brien, *The Things* 65). This is the lie that O'Brien takes apart. However, *The Things They Carried* is not the only novel in which the author explores the depths of what it means to be courageous.

In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, there is a whole section of the novel dedicated to exploring what courage actually is. Although O'Brien's flight to Canada is one of the most emotionally-driven parts of his novels, both *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *Going After Cacciato* contain segments of the stories dedicated to this underlying theme that, when combined together, give the reader a full picture. In *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, O'Brien starts ruminating on the notion of courage. He first compares it to endurance:

> Alpha Company had a bad time near the My Lais. Mines were the worst, every size and kind of mine. Toe poppers, Bouncing Betties, booby-trapped artillery and mortar rounds and hand grenades. Slocum, Smith, Easton, Dunn, Chip, Tom – all those soldiers walked on and on and on, enduring the terror, waiting, and the mines finally got them. Were they wise to keep walking? (O'Brien, *If I Die* 139)

O'Brien immediately realises that endurance in itself, it not enough. He then recalls the words of the famous Greek philosopher Socrates, who himself was a soldier of Athens. What Socrates proposes is that only wise endurance is actual courage. However, O'Brien starts questioning

whether it was wise to endure the advanced infantry training or the passage to Vietnam and all the horrors there. As O'Brien explains, he has always hated bullies. And bullyism warrants force. Just like the German blitzkrieg and the attack on Pearl Harbour. However, Vietnam did not warrant any such force. As O'Brien puts it: ". . . the war in Vietnam drifted in and out of human lives, taking them or sparing them like a headless, berserk taxi hack, without evident cause, a war fought for uncertain reasons" (O'Brien, *If I Die* 139). If so, enduring through training and through the war was foolish, and as such ". . . merely a well-disguised cowardice" (O'Brien *If I Die* 139). But even the definition of wise endurance was not enough, because how can one know when something is foolish or wise. That is why it important to think and talk about courage. The men in Alpha company did not think nor talk about courage. They did not think about death or the war. They did not remember each other's names, merely the nicknames they gave each other. When somebody was killed, he was simply "wasted". O'Brien does not think the men of the Alpha company are courageous. Except for captain Johansen, who he equated to Hector, the hero of the Trojan war:

> 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 . . . . Most soldiers in Alpha Company did not think about human courage . . . . in the villages of My Lai and My Khe, where the question of courage is critical, no one except Captain Johansen seemed to care . . . . When I compared subsequent company commanders to Johansen, it was clear that he alone cared enough about being brave to think about it and try to do it. (O'Brien, *If I Die* 140-145)

He was the only man in Alpha company, besides O'Brien himself, who thought about courage. And that, in O'Brien's opinion, was what elevated him above the rest and what made him worthy of admiration and respect. After Johansen left and was replaced by another, less competent commanding officer, the men of Alpha company felt as though they had lost their own mythical Hector (O'Brien, *If I Die* 145). O'Brien talks further about his childhood heroes, but he finds them faulty and lacking in courage. In the end, O'Brien settles that, along with wise endurance, it is those men who question courage, and who at times act cowardly and other times not, who do well on average, ". . . perhaps with one moment of glory . . ." (O'Brien, *If I Die* 147), that are truly brave.

In *Going After Cacciato,* the theme of courage is very subtle. The entire story, which is imagined by the novel's protagonist, Paul Berlin, from the moment he and the rest of his squad

try capturing Cacciato, can be equated to O'Brien's attempt to escape the war by fleeing to Canada. Just like O'Brien tried to flee to Canada in *The Things They Carried*, and then plan his escape to Sweden in *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, so does Cacciato plan his escape to Paris and leads his former brothers-in-arms on a wild goose chase. "Paul Berlin tries to imagine whether it is possible to walk from Vietnam to Paris, a trip whose desired end is really to travel back in time to the glorious moment of American triumph in World War II" (Kinney 44). Unlike O'Brien, Cacciato has no qualms about going to Paris. The one who ruminates the possibility of chasing after Cacciato, and in turn reaching Paris, is Paul Berlin. He spends an entire night at a guard tower imagining the ways they might reach Paris, and the things they would encounter. "Paul Berlin's desire to return to the site of America's moment of apparent historical innocence seeks to recover, in the double sense of regaining and covering again, a history gone wrong" (Kinney 48). Berlin, no matter how much he imagines the trip to Paris would go, cannot escape the same outcome. That they would face shame and be court marshalled for being AWOL. There is an imagined part in the novel where, in a conference room, Sarkin Aun Wang, a Vietnamese refugee who joins Paul Berlin and his unit on their trip to Paris, urges Paul Berlin to abandon his pursuit of Cacciato. However, the following quotation echoes the same feelings O'Brien had at the border to Canada:

> But please. I don't want to overemphasize all this. More than any positive sense of obligation, I confess that what dominates is the dread of abandoning all that I hold dear. I am afraid of running away. I am afraid of exile. I fear what might be thought of me by those I love. I fear the loss of their respect. I fear the loss of my own reputation. Reputation, as read in the eyes of my father and mother, the people in my hometown, my friends. I fear being an outcast. I fear being thought of as a coward. I fear that even more than cowardice itself. (O'Brien, *Cacciato* 320)

As *Going After Cacciato* was written and published before *The Things They Carried*, it could be possible that the author, through his fictional character Paul Berlin, tried to express his own feelings and reasons for going to war and choosing not to be brave. Paul Berlin, like his creator, would also kill and maybe die – because he was afraid not to.

Conclusion

The theme of what true courage entails and what it means to be brave is explored throughout three of O'Brien's novels that deal with the Vietnam War. The author marvellously deconstructs the "very old and terrible lie" – that serving one's country no matter what and doing one's duty is the ultimate form of courage, a lie that is deeply rooted in the American war culture. It is not bravery that drives young men to go to distant countries and wage war in the name of one's country, rather, it is the fear of being ostracized. O'Brien flips this traditional notion of courage and proposes that true courage is to be able to resist societal and national conformity and compliance. The novels also portray the full depth of the human spirit and the full sensibility of the Vietnam war era. It can be concluded that the author's intent for this opus was for it to be a reminder to future generations – to not fall for the old and terrible lie, to not fear the stigma of a society bereft of reason and to do what is right:

> I would wish this book could take the form of a plea for everlasting peace, a plea from who knows, from one who's been there and come back, an old soldier looking back at a dying war. That would be good. It would be fine to integrate it all to persuade my younger brother and perhaps some others to say no to wrong wars. (O'Brien, *If I Die* 23)

The Vietnam war started as a fight against French colonial rule and later turned into a full-fledged civil war between the communist North Vietnam and democratic South Vietnam supported by US troops. The Vietnam war still remains one of the most divisive conflicts in US history, and the fact that the United States fought against a country looking to overthrow colonial rule makes it even more tragic. The major battles of the war were the battle of Dien Bien Phu and the Tet offensive, the latter of which changed the entire course of the war in favour of North Vietnam. While the Tet offensive was a military failure, it proved to the US that the conflict would not be won so easily, and it shook the American war culture to its core, with even those who were supportive of the war up until that point questioning whether it was right or wrong. However, although the conflict was nearing its end, O'Brien was one of the unlucky young men who were drafted for the war. This caused him a great deal of anxiety, and it was then that O'Brien realised what it truly meant to be courageous, although he himself could not be brave. True courage means opposing the war and not participating in it, which turns the entire traditional notion of courage on its head.

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