

## **Delineation Of Traumatic War Experiences In Tim O'Brien's *If I Die In A Combat Zone***

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### **Abstract**

Tim O'Brien is considered as one of the most prolific, inspiring, and finest American modern writers today. He has established himself as a proficient writer, especially in Vietnam War fiction, since he himself was a part of that bloody conflict which took place from 1955 to 1975. His experiences in the Vietnam war get reflect throughout his works. *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, is an autobiographical work which was published in 1973, is a work of non-fiction, a memoir which delivers the true feeling of war as experienced by the writer himself, his most personal thoughts about the war and his own mental state during and after the war itself, bringing about his story to a logical end. In his work O'Brien argues that the Vietnam war had deteriorated him and his fellow soldiers minds due to the responsibility of serving for their country and the constant back and forth mental conflict of wanting to leave the war but there was a compulsion and continues their duty in the war field. Even though, they do their duty for the country, but the scars and impacts on the horrendous war cannot be left on the minds of the author and the other soldiers too. It gives an ineradicable experience to those who participated in the war.

**Key Words:** experience, responsibility, mental conflict, impact, memoir.

### **Introduction**

Tim O'Brien is a Prolific American War related novelist, short story writer, and journalist. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is a famous work and that reflects author's personal experience as an infantry soldier in the Vietnam war. Through the chapters of the book, author explains how he was drafted, moving through Vietnam, taking training and returning home. He represents the war as a harrowing experience by describing accounts of issues, mental and physical burdens, responsibility, and dedication. Some famous writers like Mark Heberle, Tobey Herzog, Steven Kaplan, and Roy Scranton explain that O'Brien's fiction attempts to reflect the unique nature of wartime experiences and its ultimate representation.

Throughout the story, the central conflict is that O'Brien does not want to go to war, but he is finding a way to get out of it. As a teenager, O'Brien develops an interest in politics. He goes to a democratic meeting after completing his graduation, but later he receives a draft notice that inducts him into the Vietnam war. He is scared and believes that the concept of war is wrong it causes so much traumatic death. since his family believes in patriotic service and the compulsion from them and society made him agreed to go. He writes, "The war I thought, was wrongly conceived and poorly justified. But perhaps I was mistaken, and who really knew, anyway?" (27).

Whenever he trying to escape from military training, and an opportunity arises for him to leave, something holds him back from doing so, and that something is their responsibility of serving to their country. Larry Curtis Heinemann (1944-2019), the American soldier-author of *Paco's story* (1987), who wrote about his Vietnam war experience, shows great empathy with the protagonist O'Brien, who is displeased with the town people's "lethargic acceptance." Heinemann appears to have been in the same state as O'Brien. Heinemann recalls the days he spent in the United States just before he served as a soldier from 1967 to 1968. He shares his view in an interview: "No one told us we could go to care; No one told us we could become conscientious objectors... No one told us we did have to go" (Heinemann 57).

O'Brien begins his journey in a training camp in Washington, having a close comrade named Erik, who shares similar views with him. During his time at the camp, he considers the senselessness of the war and thinks of feeling the country with his comrade Erik. O'Brien was surrounded by the chaotic concept of fight or flight. This perplexity of the protagonist O'Brien in combat zone shows the moral dilemma posed when considering whether "to resist, flee, or establish a separate peace" (Herzog, "Critical Angles" (173). This shows O'Brien's either-or situation but, the protagonist decides to accept responsibility for his people as well for the nation, which eventually forces him to make the final decision to go to Vietnam. But, his life in combat is covered in constant fear and anxiety. In fear of death, O'Brien and his fellow soldiers practice courage and bravery every day. They do this while watching American soldiers die in combat from bombs and landmines. O'Brien witnesses' violence and ruthlessness in war while he is fighting for the Alpha company. He lives in a revolving door of courageousness and danger as young men struggle and lose their life for their country on both sides. A master piece in its own story that clearly illustrates the brave acts of those who fought valiantly. The soldiers, regardless of which side they represent, pushes and those who survives are cursed to remember it. It reflects the sentiment that "courage is

more than charge; more than dying or suffering. The loss of love in silence or being gallant. It is temperament and, more, wisdom" (141).

At the end of the summer, he joins the army. In the first chapter, "Days" O'Brien has been in Vietnam, in the midst of a conversation with fellow soldiers. He describes his firsthand experience of combat and the feeling of fear, bravery, and loss. Here, the author portrays the nature of life during the Vietnam war, with every side shooting sound, which demonstrates that death could come at any moment. The night gives the real fear to the soldiers. At night, he used to recall his childhood time, and his memory of past veterans in his town, which suggests that his town's military frames are his sense of identity. During that time in Vietnam is deep dark and he feels angry. So, he writes out his obstruction to the war on pieces of cardboard, declaring that the war is sinful and immoral. On August 13, he has his basic training. The next day O'Brien and other soldiers swear their induction oath but, O'Brien never been a fighter; he is a "confirmed liberal." He thinks the Vietnam war should end and he fears the exile that would result from refusing to fight and after the war is over, he still feels that conflict. He never likes the war and does not want to follow the order, rather he fears the opposites, inevitable chaos, censure, and embarrassment. Most of the time he worries innocent people and the dead soldiers, because they are heavy and awkward to carry. The fragrance in Vietnam is different and he smells the stink of blood everywhere. Most of the Soldiers are afraid but they act as if they are brave, and some of the soldiers think the war is proper but others show their displeasure with it. In an interview with Schroeder, O'Brien shares the cruelty of the Vietnam war: "For me Vietnam wasn't unreal experience; it wasn't absurd, it was cold-blooded, calculated war" (Interview 146).

On the next day the soldiers marching cautiously, looking for mines. O'Brien lists, each carrying heavy burdens both physical and emotional. They keep marching until the end of the day. They cannot take rest at all; this hurts them heavily. Through this, O'Brien understands and learn basic training at Fort Lewis in Washington, but he hates everything. In the training place he had a friend named Erik. With whom he used to discuss his hatred to the war. Blyton the soldier in training who kindled them for their opposition of war, to avoid this they both spending their time lonely and talk about Ezra Bound poetry. In this poem, Hugh Selwyn Mauberley's Achilles is a great hero but Erik and O'Brien think they are not brave heroes like Achilles since they came here for out of compulsion.

Being a soldier is very tough one at all, their mind is not ready to fight all the time. Sometimes they feel homesick, and frightened, their bones, muscles and brain are not ready for the duties and the harsh voices of the Higher. Physically and mentally, they are hurt by the petty urgencies of the morning. The soldiers want to escape from these kinds of tortures, it kills them every day.

Morning is the worst time. It is the most hopeless, most despairing time. The darkness of Fort Lewis morning is choked off by brazen lights, the shrieks of angry men and frightened, homesick boys. The bones and muscles and brain are not ready for three-o'clock mornings, not ready for duties and harsh voices. The petty urgencies of the morning physically hurt. (46)

After the soldiers have advanced infantry training, they learn soldiers learn a new way to fight, tricky way to kill enemies, trained to operate claymore mines, booby traps, M-60 machine gun, and M-70grenade. Every day the soldiers carry out lots of push-ups and lots of midnight marches. The battle field seems Sloopy, dirty, and very cold, which make their gloves freeze and minds too. This reflects the hardest time in Vietnam, since they have no place to warm their hands and minds. O'Brien wants to escape from the challenging situation. In order to escape these ordeals, he spends time in the library and searches for a possible way to escape from the war field, since he is affected heavily.

On the next day O'Brien met the chaplain named Edward. The author tries to explain his opinion to escape from the war field to him he thought fighting in a war is a not good one, because it gives physical hurt, fear, emotion, conscience to him rather the author wants to a live a good and peaceful life. But Edward, the soldier in the war refuses and explains the bravery act, he says this place is for "guts and bravery" and this is a fine one prove one's heroism. But O'Brien did not get convinced and try to explains his ethical objection to fighting. "I believe, therefore, that a man is most a man when he tries to recognize and understand what is good-when he tries to ask in reasonable way about things: is it good? And I believe, finally, that a man cannot be fully a man until, deciding that something is right, his actions make the real suspect bravery of the mind". (62)

O'Brien continues to serve in the military and determine to prove his manhood, not just because of Edward's encouragement but from the pressures he had from his family. On the other hand, his friend Erik unwillingness to serve in the war field reveals the soldier's fear, shame, and the burden they carry. of fear and shame. Carl S. Horner highlights these emotions in "The Sacred rules of a male Horner code."

Rational control over the emotion of fear or doubt; strength not only of body but also 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. (76)

In the chapter "Arrival", the soldiers moved to another place, which is surrounded by pale grey mountain. Looks like a zone of ash and smoke. With this O'Brien senses the badness everywhere. The soldiers spend a week at the combat centre. The first month with alpha company was a peculiar time to them, they wander up and down. On the night time the soldiers sit around in the foxholes. One among in the team guarding the road while the others is sleep. Watching the road was not

an easy job it gives horrible sensation and also severe pain in their feet and thighs. Despite experiencing the cruelties of the war, they try to get rid of the painful situation by dredging over the memories of their family.

Other thoughts stirred. I peered out at the road, my eyes frozen there but my brain dredging up all sorts of memories and fantasies. I imagined that the twenty of us had suddenly become the objects of this night's hunt, that we were fooling ourselves to think that we remained the hunters, in control of the war and our destinies. (95)

When O'Brien glance backward. Only trees and shadows remain. The wet ground and heavy cold make him tired physically and mentally there was no way to sleep at all. Not only the author himself but others also have faced many kinds of problems. At the time O'Brien receives a letter from Erik, which begins with the description of the April month. He April is the cruellest month and sun is their cunning enemy. He quotes the poetic lines: "April is the cruellest month" (109). This reference is from T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland" which deals Erik perceives the Vietnam war in a similar light: a senseless conflict. Then O'Brien replies to Erik, about the difficulty of being a soldier, and the worst part of combat. He explains how the soldiers shoot even before they touch their ground, it gives them a terrifying experience and even they do not have time to break. They feel their helmets too heavy to wear it under the scorching sun, it is painful and agony in a slow and torturous way for them. In other side of their enemies were killed, some of the soldiers in their team also died. The rest of the soldiers are happy to alive and feel brave

On the next day the soldiers enter My Lai village, which was completely ruined and empty, and all the places were scattered, this symbolises that frustration and anger were built with each explosion. Women, children, and old men were killed along with farm animals. Crops, huts were burned, and wells were despoiled. The soldiers killed so many civilians. This demonstrates the danger of social prejudice and soldierly misconduct. "I heard screams in the burning black rubble. I heard the enemy's AK-47 rifles crack out like impotent popguns against the jets. And there were babies and children and people who just didn't give a damn in there, too" (123).

O'Brien describes of paralysing fear over the mines and suggests that these weapons make every inch of Vietnam feel potentially fatal, creating an exceedingly high-stress and exhausting environment, that easily generates to psychological outburst. Fight in a war is not an easy one, it gives an unbearable pain. Even though the soldiers hate war, and come by the compulsion of their family, and parents, and continue their duty with their memories. In the war field they get shiver when as they move through every inch. However, they have to walk with serious attention without worrying about everything that comes future.

It's more than the fear of death that chews on your mind,' one soldier, nineteen years old, eight months in the field, said. It's an absurd combination of certainty and uncertainty: the certainty that you're walking in the minefields, walking past the thing's day after day; the uncertainty of your every movement, of which way to shift your weight, of where to sit down (127).

O'Brien recalled this struggle when he was drafted by the obligation of his family and described it in the interview with Larry McCaffery in 1979:

It seemed arrogant simply to give them [ O'Brien's family and community] the finger and say, "No. I won't go." The "gravity" ...was a feeling of emotional pressure- a fear of exile, of hurting my family, of losing everything I held to be valuable in my life. In the end, questions of political rightness or wrongness succumbed to the emotional pressure. (7)

His remarks in the interview suggest that his final decision to go to Vietnam was not made as a result of bellicose feelings. Rather, it clearly shows that he reluctantly chose the unfruitful and traumatizing war that had been repeatedly making O'Brien feel disgusted. He refers to the bitter memory of this dilemma in many interviews.

On the next day in Alpha company, Captain Johansen and other soldiers take rest at the time. During that period Captain Johansen discusses with O'Brien about bravery, "I would rather be brave than almost anything" (134). O'Brien ponders bravery, wondering what it is and who has it. He recalls *Laches*, a philosophical dialogue by Plato. In *Laches*, Socrates considers the nature of courage and he observes that, "courage an endurance of soul" (137). Socrates points out enduring is not always courageous, so they amend their definition of courage to wise endurance. Plato says, "men without courage are men without temperance, justice, and wisdom, just as without wisdom men are not truly courageous. Men must know what they do is courageous, they must know it is right, and that kind of knowledge is wisdom and nothing else" (140).

Through this, O'Brien thinks how he endured basic training, the days in the war field, and wonders if that endurance was wise or fool hard. He does not feel The Vietnam war morally imperative, and consider it needless. He once again thinks of Plato, argued for endurance tempered by wisdom. If someone is wise, then knows that he is doing the right thing. Most men are not courageous, either they know what is it right but can do it, or they endure their way through something the only think is right. "Courage is more than the courage," but O'Brien thinks that the most soldiers don't truly think about courage, especially not in Alpha company.

O'Brien thinks courage is about having guts and acting under pressure, and he reckons, the soldier who endure the war even though it was wrong are not courageous at all, but rather they are misguided. Captain Johansen is a courageous person. He does not agree with O'Brien, and he says that coward dies thousand time, but a brave man only once. O'Brien saying that, most men in Alpha company neither cowards nor heroes. The best way is they have to do their work and try to be braver.

O'Brien thought even though the soldiers were brave on the battle field, mentally they were not ready to see the dead bodies of children, women, animals, and the fellow soldiers on the battle field. Some of them get stuck in the deep and dark rice paddy field and have trouble finding some wounded and dead soldiers. They are heavy to carry. It reflects not only the ground is dark and heavy, but their minds are also in the same colour and struggle, they cannot fresh their mind by seeing the colourful flowers and trees. It takes them depressed.

O'Brien tries to find some sort of meaning to all the pain but he could not find anything. This war is meaningless and needless as it results only in horrific suffering and death. He gets irritated at the artillery gun, foxholes, machine guns. Even though they are providing support to the soldiers in the field, it was heavy to carry and they need an extra energy to take it. O'Brien is one of the opinions that war changes nothing in the world, the remaining thing is full of horror and pain. At last, in Vietnam all the soldiers have the experiences as well as horrors and unforgettable pains. They returning home with a heartful of memories, and unpleasant experiences and feelings that they have met in the war field.

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