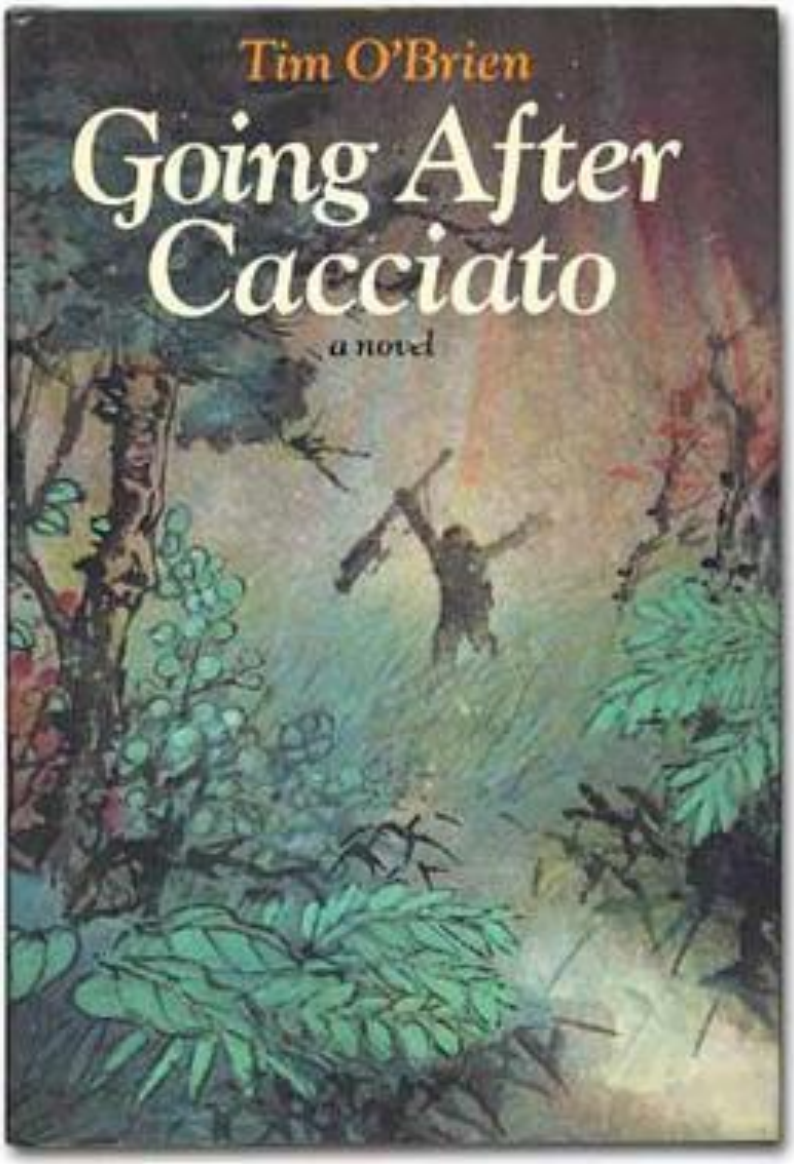
# Tim O'Brien's Going After Cacciato




An essay by Garry Victor Hill

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Americans in Vietnam 1965

## Essay

In Tim O'Brien's 1978 novel *Going After Cacciato* he outlines the new type of cynical heroism where the loner opposes his own military industrial complex. This type of hero had been emerging in American literature since the 1920s, but were becoming more common after World War Two, when they even predominated over the orthodox. O'Brien was amongst those writers presenting this idea with more clarity than what many had implied or presented in inchoate forms. Even so O'Brien does not take this idea as far as it can go, for the central character, Paul Berlin ultimately rejects this development for the old ideals of duty and loyalty. This surprises, as in this novel these old ideals have been shown to have little if any validity.

The now common phrase "an army of Yossarians" aptly describes almost all the G.I.s in O'Brien's novel, for they also have abandoned the military ideals, are hostile to authority and dream of escaping the war, most by returning to America, and Cacciato and Paul Berlin by going to Paris.

Cacciato tries to make this a reality by deserting in the Vietnamese jungles and attempts a walk to Paris. While his platoon, commanded by Lieutenant Corson, pursue their platoon's deserter to the Laotian border, the novel remains in a realist mode, but after this point the novel divides, alternating between Paul Berlin's wistful vision of pursuing a deserter across Asia and Europe and his horrific, demoralising real war experiences.

Both types of depiction show the savage, bizarre, hopeless nature of American involvement in the Vietnam War. Cacciato's almost hopeless dream of escaping to Paris and the platoon's subsequent pursuit, echoes the almost hopeless quest for American victory in Vietnam which appears as equally improbable. O'Brien's alternating narrative structure

implicitly suggests that American involvement was also based in wishful dreams and like Lieutenant Corson's platoon, the American forces which O'Brien depicts find themselves increasingly distancing themselves from reality. They become more confused, dispirited, divided and uncertain. This results in abandoning the idea of duty for self-interest.

Only one man, Lieutenant Sydney Martin, consistently abides by ideas of duty, taking on the traditional hero's role. A West Point graduate and a professional soldier, he still believes in the ideal mission. This belief appears as almost mystical and also in the tradition of seeing warfare as being the ultimate test of a man's worth and therefore any mission has a duality, the given order and the test of courage endurance and willpower. To him these personal tests are more important.

Sydney Martin follows his concept of duty by the book, giving gung ho speeches before missions and ordering them to search enemy tunnels before destroying them, a practice which leads to heavy casualties and therefore resentment, but for Sydney Martin victory has primacy. Despite his dedication he can see that something was wrong with the American effort in the Vietnam War and he prefers dreams of battles past. Despite this realisation and his lack of understanding about how men think, he still risks his life and those in the platoon. His heroism serves a war as recondite, as pointless and murky as his insistent searches through endless entwining long tunnels. These recall the much quoted, much mocked statement about eventual victory in Vietnam being a light at the end of the tunnel, the tunnel being the process of war. He sees this process as a testing process to bring out the best in men.

Despite his disavowals, the fatalities in tunnel searches will clearly lead not only to victory but also to his glory as these searches show enemy casualties, gain booty and are considered a sign of a successful mission. Once again establishing the hero figure comes on the sacrifice of supposedly lesser men, the hero’s followers, forming a base. He idealistically hopes that the men will see the need to sacrifice them for

gains. The men however see the war as being a threat to their survival and Sydney Martin as part of that threat. Ironically they reverse his ideas of military sacrifice: they can see the need to sacrifice him for their essential gain - their survival. As Sergeant Oscar Johnson says, Sydney Martin threatens that survival, and they are motivated by Darwinian ideas of survival of the species: John says that the species being us. He describes the lieutenant as someone who does not learn realities, which works as another irony, as he wants his platoon to learn. Johnson states that Martin understands only standard operating procedures. Johnson plans to kill Martin and apparently does, with the entire platoon excepting Cacciato acquiescing. Ironically these are the men who chase Cacciato across half the globe, supposedly from a sense of duty.

Martin's death also becomes the death of traditional heroism in this novel. Once Martin becomes a battlefield fatality *Going After Cacciato* has no character consistently trying to be a hero. Instead there are only a group of men trying to catch their elusive deserter.

Apart from the way they place their self-survival above duty and show a cynicism towards authority and the patriotic ideals, these men lack essential elements for heroism; a sense of traditional rules, aims and military order. Paul Berlin's thoughts could apply to both the American military in Vietnam and to the army in microcosm, his platoon. Even before Martin’s death there was hostility to the idea of necessary sacrifice. He realises that they lack even more, the military basics of a clear aim, structure or targets, a sense of order, even a cause to fight for, or a cause of the war. Even a desire for victory has gone. Everything has been sacrificed for survival, which will come by going home.

They also lack a crucial element for heroism to exist, an identifiable villain to oppose, for the rarely seen Vietcong are almost intangible and are confused with the Vietnamese. They are too rare, different and therefore strange, and therefore unknowable to relate to in any clear manner, even as enemies.

The one occasion that the platoon does encounter an enemy soldier strongly reinforces the idea that they really have no enemy, for when

they meet Li Van Hgoc they chat. This reclusive major exists in the centre of a labyrinth of Vietcong tunnels. Once a scholar, who was reluctantly conscripted, he does essentially the same thing as they are - opting out of participating in the war, while still officially part of his military. Far from being an enemy, he acts as a traditional donor, greeting them with "Welcome" and telling them what a pleasure for him that they dropped in. This comes across as a parody of a suburban Tupperware party where unexpected gusts during a doorbell and are greeted. Bizarre as the setting and situation are the scene becomes surrealistic as the platoon respond by acting as traditional acolytes, asking varied questions that show their ignorance about the war. Of their other questions only a magician could answer. They show their hunger for the stability and clarity which comes from strong traditions embodied in stories and myths. Before meeting Van, only remnants of the form and imagery, remnants of ritual disconnected from clear meaning remained so that the platoon do not know what they should believe. This results in them not knowing good from evil.

O'Brien here follows a frequent pattern in earlier American war literature. Like Henry Fleming in the forest in *The Red Badge of Courage*, Jake Barnes in Roncevalles Cathedral in Hemingway's *Fiesta* and Mailer's platoon approaching the beach on Anopopei on their mission in *The Naked and the Dead*, the platoon are overwhelmed by a sense of exotic magic they do not understand, but they strive for meaning. They read into Van someone who like traditional donors, can supply all the answers they crave, even to telling them which of their friends are dead and how they died. Such requests, based in their hunger, make Van a magician or a god.

The mythical archetypal elements are also evident when Van uses a periscope to show Paul Berlin a group of G.I.s looking down a tunnel hole, a moment of self-revelation in which the periscope replaces the magic reflector, usually a mirror, a pool or water in a container. He also offers wisdom that sounds gnomic and Confucian, comparing their Vietcong enemies to a leopard that the jungle hides.

He then reveals to them their real enemy, the land, with its tunnels, land mines, poisoned water and hostile terrain. From the first the novel is permeated with a sense of fighting the elements and the land. When after listing those killed, but not who killed them, O'Brien describes the environment as if it killed the men and the Americans are fighting it. Heavy tropical rain feeds fungus which soon grows in their boots and socks, so that their skin can be easily scraped away. Leeches, dysentery and the monsoons wear them down. Ammunition corrodes, foxholes fill with mud and water and the futile campaigning remains incessant

This situation conjures up a picture of powerless soldiers miserably dying and subsisting amidst images of the mythical wasteland. This suggests that Corson's platoon foolishly fights more than even natural elements; they fight a natural order. This means that the G.I.s cannot carry out the traditional hero's task of restoring order to the land, as they are its enemy. Van tells them that the Vietcong are merely like a leopard in the jungle, at once protected by the land while being a part of it and the most salient expression of the environment's hostility. By focusing on the Vietcong they have misunderstood the nature of the conflict, its immensity and the impossibility of winning.

Instead they change focus, instead of fighting they turn tracking a deserter into a mission. They travel across the land, rather than fight it as they trying to catch the elusive Cacciato, who appears as neither villain nor hero, but they refer to him and believe him to be an apparent simpleton with a knack for survival and a way of confounding his pursuers: this suggests he may not really be so simple as they believe. While he remains an enigma they read all types of traits and motives into him. Attempts by men in the platoon to demonise Cacciato and make their pursuit a part of restoring military order sound hollow: it becomes ridiculous to make him a substitute enemy for the Vietcong, especially after he saves them from execution in Teheran.

Consequently their pursuit across much of Asia and Europe does not function as a hero journey, a rites of passage or a learning experience. Instead this journey develops into a series of misadventures,

chaotic dramas and moments of comic chaos. Often either Cacciato or the refugee Sarkin Aung Wan rescue them from their self-inflicted folly. The further they travel the more irrelevant their military values seem and the more confused and ridiculous they become, deserters chasing a deserter to conceal their desertion from the authorities and perhaps their murder of Lieutenant Martin from themselves. They also show that the soldier out of place can only be ridiculous and pathetic: as evident in the imagery of a platoon of uniformed, armed G.I.s thousands of kilometres from Indo-China, patrolling peaceful landscapes such as the boulevards of Paris in April 1969.

By the time their Paris visit ends with the cornering of Cacciato, their leader, Lieutenant Corson, two other G.I.s and Sarkin Aung Wan have deserted or vanished, both from the chase and the war. Of the four remaining G.I.s, two are there reluctantly, being dominated by Sergeant Johnson, their new leader. He chases Cacciato from a sense of self-preservation, not duty. He believes that the law will perceive them deserters and that they will be inevitably caught. His solution is to catch or kill their pursued deserter and then they will have evidence to prove their mission to the American embassy. Just as Sergeant Johnson arranged the killing of Lieutenant Martin because he threatened the group's survival by being too inflexible and dutiful, so he arranges the killing of Cacciato for being too flexible and undutiful. In both cases he gets the other G.I.s to agree through a ritual of touching the killing weapon. Twice Paul Berlin takes part in this ritual, but when he accompanies Sergeant Johnson as he closes in on Cacciato's apartment Johnson tells him he is not wanted, he's the worst and he is a yo-yo, which is fifties-sixties slang for an extremely erratic, silly, unreliable person. Paul Berlin insists repeatedly on going in for the kill and does, but when they are in their deserter s abandoned apartment the vision he has betrayed dissolves the moment he starts firing, and Cacciato has vanished he fires at a real or imagined enemy in Vietnam.

Paul Berlin emerges as the character who has the capacity for heroism, either of the traditional kind or in a new form that will challenge the system. Throughout this novel there are incidents,

recollections, choices and musings which show how he could move either way. His memories of a happy childhood in a stable middle class environment in peaceful, prosperous Kansas lead him towards conservatism as he dreams of his future after the war as his approving father welcomes him home and he refers to winning medals he will be unlikely to get.

This daydream clearly echoes the traditional hero returning to an orderly land he has served and often saved. Here after being through the testing of the Vietnamese wasteland. Paul Berlin then continues his dream and this theme of restoring order and replenishment through working with his father in the prosperous home building industry. Such dreams of a peaceful homecoming recall those of many victorious, order restoring heroes. However after the dreams of returning home by American military personnel from the 1920s onwards reveal a disillusioning: such dreams seem not only unreal, but archaic, even corny. However Berlin this dream turns to one of further excitement, touring Europe, where he will toast Cacciato and emulate his Parisian tour.

His military experiences show a similar dichotomy. He covets the Silver Star, yet when Sarkin Aung Wan asks who Eisenhower is, he replies that he is a nobody, a hero. He views the army sardonically, yet feels pleased to gain his promotion. He goes along with the promotion board, and also with the three men who are his superiors; Sydney Martin, Lieutenant Corson and Oscar Johnson, despite the way they issue very different orders. It is Berlin who under Johnson's orders, tries to talk Cacciato into acquiescing in Martin's murder. It is Berlin who finally finds him in Paris and lets Johnson know, thereby precipitating the last entrapment.

Berlin's more rebellious side becomes evident in his frequent sardonic comments about the army, his attachment to Sarkin (which goes against both procedure and Corson's direct orders) and his vision of the journey, which shows his longing for a different, more peaceful

world. He dreams of Sarkin Aung Wan and himself living together, enjoying life in Paris.

When they reach Paris a new world clearly emerges. This appears as obvious by reports in the newspaper they find. The major stories in different ways show this. They cover the death of Eisenhower, the beginnings of Nixon's presidency and the trial of the Chicago Seven, the scaling down of American involvement in Vietnam and the Paris peace talks. Berlin sees little significance in these events because the world goes on and old facts are rehashed. Heroes are more receptive and astute in interpreting situations. Riots against American involvement in Vietnam, which almost led to a political revolution and did lead to a massive social revolution, are just a story he missed while in training camp. For him the cartoon section goes on, as does the war. The Paris Peace talks and the scaled down war effort signify an extraordinary and unprecedented event. For the first time in its history, America heads for at best a negotiated peace in a war it is losing – and against a poor, minor Third World Country supporting guerrilla forces in an allied nation. American military invincibility is being shattered, just as Nixon's presidency will leave the image of the president permanently changed. Berlin can only see that the war goes on, which to him seems nothing new.

Berlin does realise that Eisenhower's death means the end of an era, but he finds that he cannot feel very much as Eisenhower was more of a hero to his father's generation. Ironically Lieutenant Corson, part of his father's generation and whom Paul thought idolises Eisenhower, responds to the Paul's condolences about the great man with a brusque comment that he never knew him. He then encourages Paul to desert and live with Sarkin. Even when Paul raises objections about duty and mission Corson compares this to water going over a bust dam. When Paul repeats that point about being part of a squad Corson asks him does he really buy this shit?

Paul Berlin does. He adapts to the idea of duty and obligation for a war already clearly lost. He tries to be a traditional hero at a time when

that role is dying and one of its most successful practitioners, Eisenhower, dies as an outdated figure, a reminder of a past time. Colson's defection from duty doubly reinforces this: as an officer and also one of Eisenhower's generation he should back the idea of the hero and of his duty: instead his defection reveals how weak outmoded and unpopular the idea has become. Even his father only embodies the conservative qualities in Paul's imagination; the reader never has anything to go on concerning this character but what Paul imagines. Like Colson he may have changed. Paul Berlin remains motivated in part by images of a stable American society at a time when divisive politics are tearing American society apart. Although not explicitly stated in the text, his loyalty implicitly goes to Nixon, a leader renowned for treachery and sanctimonious expediency. Although he can envision in detail a pursuit across half the globe, he clearly cannot always grasp the important significance of what he sees, is told or reads.

In a fantasy scene set in a Parisian theatre he consciously makes the choice between the traditional and the emergent concept of heroism. Structured to echo the Paris Peace talks, Sarkin and Paul, an American and a Vietnamese, face each other across a rounded table, each surrounded by the accoutrements of high level negotiation. Her walkout when Paul does not take up an offer echoes frequent Vietnamese responses during the negotiations of 1968-1973. Here Sarkin clarifies everything she feels and praises Paul's virtues. She then asks him to go further to take the steps that will mean he will live out his dreams with pride and make happiness possible.

She specifies that beyond this passive personal enjoyment dynamism will be a necessity and that some of the essential characteristics of traditional heroism, the perpetuation of the current order handed on by the father and the replenishment of society, still apply. She differs from this tradition in that the traditional method, violence, must be eschewed. Unknowingly Sarkin moves towards Campbell's view of reaffirming the traditional hero's role as the visionary who will return to give life, order and strength to society, through making his vision of the heavenly real on earth. She also sees

how avoiding evil and envisioning good are not enough. He must return at last to the world as it exists: however much that world conflicts with his visions. He should do whatever he can to edge reality toward his vision. He should do this by changing what he can, going beyond wishes or fantasies. This appeal fits exactly what Joseph Campbell in his *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1948) calls answering the appeal to adventure and doing what must be this task of the traditional hero.

Despite her warning that he should be unafraid of scorn, ridicule, and name-calling or be led by a false sense of obligation, he openly rejects the call to adventure precisely because he cannot break with a sense of obligation that he feels.

Like so many traditional heroes in fact and fiction, he remains a prisoner of his sense of duty, sees changing direction as a betrayal of his oaths and commitment and he takes responsibility for his actions very seriously.

He then traces his flow of responsibilities which like a prisoner's chains, link to each other to imprison him in a role. Putting on a uniform means boarding a plane for Vietnam. Accepting a promotion means chasing Cacciato and encouraging others to do so. This ties him to the mission that he must see to the end. He does not see this process as imprisoning because they are explicit consents and beyond these were tacit promises: to others; family, friends, hometown, nation and other soldiers. In this comment he reveals that like many traditional American heroes, his inspiration by a happy family life and an idyllic view of America based in his happy personal experiences limits his worldview.

In an extraordinary understatement he describes how the moral climate is imperfect but justifies his choice with the noble sounding idea that his obligations are to people not abstract principles concerning justice or politics. How agreeing to Lieutenant Martin's murder, harassing Cacciato or sacrificing Sarkin to principles fits in with humanistic concepts of obligation cannot be explained.

Paul Berlin confesses his ultimate reason, which is fear. He makes clear his pathetic fear of abandoning all that he holds dear. These include his reputation, and being made an outcast back in his hometown.

If this is not enough to reveal a profoundly limited man, he then reveals the type of social reprisals he fears being considered a coward, and for people to refuse shaking his hand. He admits that his fears might be wrong and stupid, but says he cannot gain inner peace in exile, being tied to attitudes of others and their expectations. He wants peace, dignity and tranquillity, but for him they cannot be gained by abandonment from his obligations, family and society.

This places Paul in a dichotomy formed by differing aspects of traditional heroism. Such heroes are indeed linked to, even bound by honour, obligations, family, dignity and society. Heroes cannot exist in isolation from these factors, but ironically for Paul Berlin, they are part of a trap, which ties him into not being a hero. Duty and obligation lead him into an unwinnable war that is turning Vietnam into a wasteland. Loyalty to the team leads him into acquiescing to the murder of his superior. Loyalty to his family and society destroys his relationship with the heroine and stop him from rejuvenating society. The hero role also keeps him in a childish state where his primary motivation remains satisfying his parent's associations, not becoming his own man.

Clearly the familiar elements to the old heroism no longer work or even link. They are often even in opposition and even lead away from traditional heroism. Paul Berlin can envision a better alternative, a new type of heroism, but he cannot break with his allegiance to past values to make it a reality.

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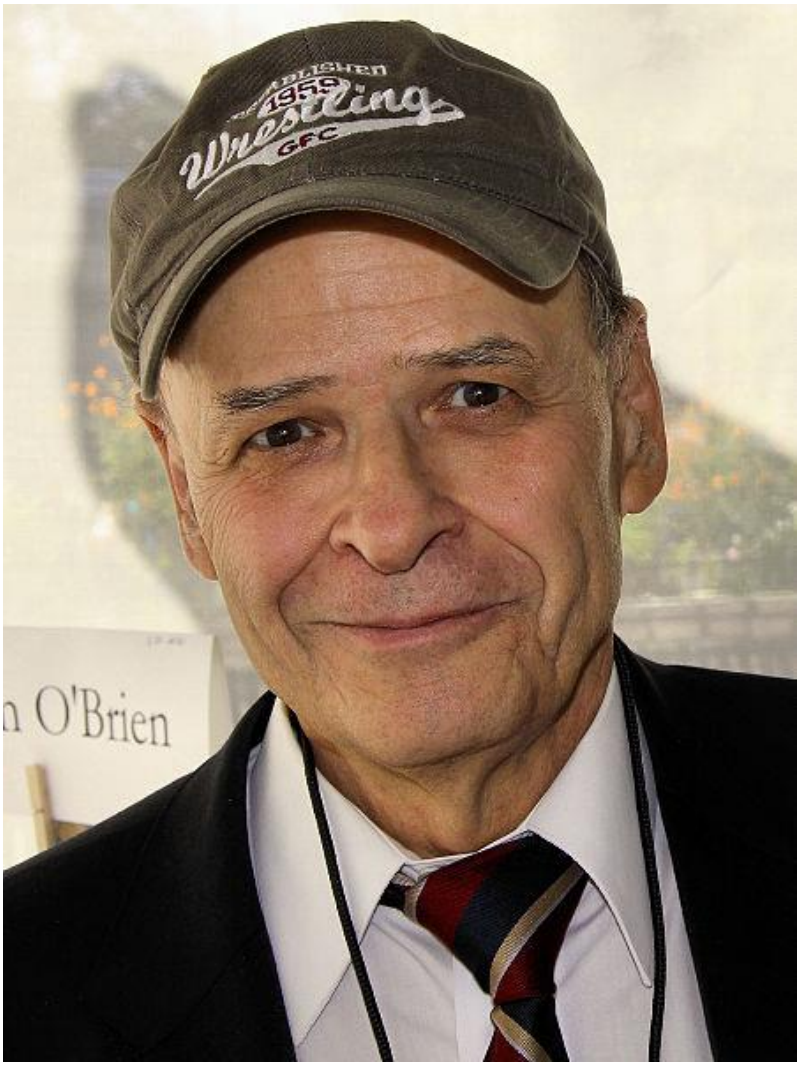


Tim O'Brien

## Picture Acknowledgements

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