



97800 U.S./\$13.00 Canada

Before writing his award-winning *Gang After Cacciato*, Tim O'Brien gave us this searing, intensely personal account of his year as a foot soldier in Vietnam. The author takes us with him—to experience combat from behind an infantryman's rifle, to walk the minefields of My Lai, to fight the heat and snipers, to crawl into the ghostly tunnels, and to explore the ambiguities of manhood and morality in a war gone terribly wrong. Beautifully written and heartfelt, *If I Die in a Combat Zone* has been hailed as a masterpiece of its genre.

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—*The New York Times Book Review*



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Tim O'Brien is the author of four other books: the novels *Northern Lights*, *Gang After Cacciato*, *The Nuclear Age*, and *The Things They Carried*.

COVER DESIGN BY FRED MARCELLINO  
COVER ILLUSTRATION BY HIRAM RICHARDSON



ISBN 0-385-29774-2

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COVER PRINTED IN U.S.A.

0385 29774



# *If I Die in a Combat Zone*

BOX ME UP AND SHIP ME HOME

TIM O'BRIEN



"A PERSONAL DOCUMENT OF ACHING CLARITY  
...A BEAUTIFUL, PAINFUL BOOK."  
—*The New York Times Book Review*

# I

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## Days

"It's incredible, it really is, isn't it? Ever think you'd be humping along some crazy-ass trail like this, jumping up and down like a goddamn bullfrog, dodging bullets all day? Back in Cleveland, man, I'd still be asleep." Barney smiled. "You ever see anything like this? *Ever?*?"

"Yesterday," I said.

"Yesterday? Shit, yesterday wasn't nothing like this."

"Snipers yesterday, snipers today. What's the difference?"

"Guess so." Barney shrugged. "Holes in your ass either way, right? But, I swear, yesterday wasn't *nothing* like this."

"Snipers yesterday, snipers today," I said again.

Barney laughed. "I tell you one thing," he said.

"You think this is bad, just wait till tonight. My God, tonight I'll be lovely. I'm digging me a foxhole like a basement."

We lay next to each other until the volley of fire

stopped. We didn't bother to raise our rifles. We didn't know which way to shoot, and it was all over anyway.

Barney picked up his helmet and took out a pencil and put a mark on it. "See," he said, grinning and showing me ten marks, "that's ten times today. Count them—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, *ten!* Ever been shot at ten times in one day?"

"Yesterday," I said. "And the day before that, and the day before that."

"No way. It's been lots worse today."

"Did you count yesterday?"

"No. Didn't think of it until today. That proves today's worse."

"Well, you should've counted yesterday."

We lay quietly for a time, waiting for the shooting to end, then Barney peeked up. "Off your ass, pal. Company's moving out." He put his pencil away and jumped up like a little kid on a pogo stick. Barney had heart.

I followed him up the trail, taking care to stay a few meters behind him. Barney was not one to worry about land mines. Or snipers. Or dying. He just didn't worry.

"You know," I said, "you really amaze me, kid. No kidding. This crap doesn't get you down, does it?"

"Can't let it," Barney said. "Know what I mean? That's how a man gets himself lethalized."

"Yeah, but—"

"You just can't let it get you down."

It was a hard march and soon enough we stopped the chatter. The day was hot. The days were always hot, even the cool days, and we concentrated on the heat and the fatigue and the simple motions of the

march. It went that way for hours. One leg, the next leg. Legs counted the days.

"What time is it?"

"Don't know." Barney didn't look back at me.

"Four o'clock maybe."

"Good."

"Tuckered? I'll hump some of that stuff for you, just give the word."

"No, it's okay. We should stop soon. I'll help you dig that basement."

"Cool."

"Basements, I like the sound. Cold, deep. Basements."

A shrill sound. A woman's shriek, a sizzle, a zipping-up sound. It was there, then it was gone, then it was there again.

"Jesus Christ almighty," Barney shouted. He was already flat on his belly. "You okay?"

"I guess. You?"

"No pain. They were *aiming* at us that time, I swear. You and me."

"Charlie knows who's after him," I said. "You and me."

Barney giggled. "Sure, we'd give 'em hell, wouldn't we? Strangle the little bastards."

We got up, brushed ourselves off, and continued along the line of march.

The trail linked a cluster of hamlets together, little villages to the north and west of the Batangan Peninsula. Dirty, tangled country. Empty villes. No people, no dogs or chickens. It was a fairly wide and flat trail, but it made dangerous slow curves and was flanked by deep hedges and brush. Two squads moved through the tangles on either side of us, pro-

tecting the flanks from close-in ambushes, and the company's progress was slow.

"Captain says we're gonna search one more village today," Barney said. "Maybe—"

"What's he expect to find?"

Barney shrugged. He walked steadily and did not look back.

"Well, what *does* he expect to find? Charlie?"

"Who knows?"

"Get off it, man. Charlie finds us. All day long he's been shooting us up. How's that going to change?"

"Search me," Barney said. "Maybe we'll surprise him."

"Who?"

"Charlie. Maybe we'll surprise him this time."

"You kidding me, Barney?"

The kid giggled. "Can't never tell. I'm tired, so maybe ol' Charles is tired too. That's when we spring our little surprise."

"Tired," I muttered. "Wear the yellow bastards down, right?"

But Barney wasn't listening.

Soon the company stopped moving. Captain Johansen walked up to the front of the column, conferred with a lieutenant, then moved back. He asked for the radio handset, and I listened while he called battalion headquarters and told them we'd found the village and were about to cordon and search it. Then the platoons separated into their own little columns and began circling the hamlet that lay hidden behind thick brush. This was the bad time: The wait.

"What's the name of this goddamn place?" Barney said. He threw down his helmet and sat on it. "Funny, isn't it? Somebody's gonna ask me someday

where the hell I was over here, where the bad action was, and, shi, what will I say?"

"Tell them St. Vith."

"What?"

"St. Vith," I said. "That's the name of this village. It's right here on the map. Want to look?"

He grinned. "What's the difference? You say St. Vith, I guess that's it. I'll never remember. How long's it gonna take me to forget *your* fuckin' name?"

The captain walked over and sat down with us, and together we smoked and waited for the platoons to fan out around the village. Now and then a radio would buzz. I handled the routine calls, Captain Johansen took everything important. All this was familiar: Cordon, wait, sweep, search. The mechanics were simple and sterile.

"This gonna take long?" Barney asked.

Captain Johansen said he hoped not. Hard to tell.

"What I mean is, you don't expect to find anything—right, sir?" Barney looked a little embarrassed.

"That's what O'Brien was saying. Says it's hopeless.

But like I told him, there's always the chance we can surprise old Charlie. Right? Always a *chance*."

The captain didn't answer.

I closed my eyes. Optimism always made me sleepy.

We waited.

When the cordon was tied up tight, Barney and the captain and I joined the first platoon. Johansen gave the order to move in. And slowly, carefully, we tiptoed into the little hamlet, nudging over jugs of rice, watching where we walked, alert to booby traps, brains foggy, numb, hoping to find nothing.

But we found tunnels. Three of them. It was late

afternoon now, and the men were tired, and the issue was whether to search the tunnels or blow them.

"So," a lieutenant said. "Do we go down?"

The men murmured. One by one we moved away, leaving the lieutenant standing alone by the cluster of tunnels. He peered at them, kicked a little dirt into the mouths, then turned away.

He walked over to Captain Johansen and they had a short conference together. The sun was setting. Already it was impossible to make out the color in their faces and uniforms. The two officers stood together, heads down, deciding.

"Blow the fuckers up," someone said. "Right now, before they make up their minds. *Now.*"

"*Fire-in-the-hole!*" Three explosions, dulled by dirt and sand, and the tunnels were blocked. "*Fire-in-the-hole!*" Three more explosions, even duller. Two grenades to each tunnel.

"Nobody's gonna be searching them buggers now."

The men laughed.

"Wouldn't find nothing anyway. A bag of rice, maybe some ammo. That's all."

"And maybe a goddamn mine, right?"

"Not worth it. Not worth my ass, damn sure."

"Well, no worry now. No way anybody's going down into *those* mothers."

"Ex-tunnels."

Another explosion, fifty yards away.

Then a succession of explosions, tearing apart huts; then yellow flashes, then white spears. Automatic rifle fire, short and incredibly close.

"See?" Barney said. He was lying beside me. "We did find 'em. We *did.*"

"Surprised them," I said. "Faked 'em right out of their shoes."

"Incoming!"

Men were scrambling. Slow motion, then fast motion, and the whole village seemed to shake.

"Incoming!" It was Barney. He was peering at me, grinning. "Incoming!"

"Nice hollering."

On the perimeter of the village, the company began returning fire, blindly, spraying the hedges with M-16 and M-79 and M-60 fire. No targets, nothing to aim at and kill. Aimlessly, just shooting to shoot. It had been going like this for weeks—snipers, quick little attacks, blind counterfire. Days, days. Those were the days.

"Cease fire," the lieutenants hollered.

"Cease fire," the platoon sergeants hollered.

"Cease the fuckin' fire," shouted the squad leaders.

"That," I told Barney, "is the chain of command."

And Barney smiled. His face had the smooth complexion of a baby brother. Tickle him and he'd coo.

When it ended, he and I walked over to where the mortar rounds had come in. Soldiers from the third platoon were standing there in the wreckage of huts and torn-down trees. It was over. Things happened, things came to an end. There was no sense of developing drama. All that remained was debris, four smoldering holes in the dirt, a few fires that would burn themselves out. "Nobody hurt," one of the men said. "Lucky thing. We was all sitting down—a little rest break, you know? Smokin' and snoozin'. Lucky, lucky thing. *Lucky.* Anybody standing up when that shit hits is dead. I mean gone." The soldier sat on his pack and opened a can of peaches. It was over. There was no fear left in him, or in any of us.

When the captain ran over to check on casualties, the same soldier repeated his story, making sure the captain understood the value of a good long rest break. Johansen smiled. What else was there to do? Smile, make a joke of it all. Blunder on. Captain Johansen told me to call battalion headquarters. "Just inform them that we're heading off for our night position. Don't mention this little firefight, okay? I don't want to waste time messing with guns or artillery—what's the use?"

I made the call. Then we hefted our packs and guns, formed up into a loose column, and straggled out of the village.

It was only a two-hundred-meter march to the little wooded hill where we made our night position, but by the time the foxholes were dug and we'd eaten cold C rations, it had been dark for nearly an hour.

The day ended.

Now night came. Old rituals, old fears. Spooks and goblins. Sometimes at night there was the awful certainty that men would die at their foxholes or in their sleep, silently, not a peep, but this night everyone talked softly and bravely. No one doubted that we'd be hit, yet there was no real terror. We hadn't lost a man that day, even after eight hours of sniping and harassment, and the enemy's failure during the day made the dark hours easier. We simply waited. Taking turns at guard, careful not to light cigarettes, we waited until nearly daybreak. And then only a half-dozen mortar rounds came down. No casualties. We were charmed.

When it was light, a new day, Bates and Barney and I cooked C rations together. Same food, same smells. The heat was what woke us up. Then flies.

Slowly, the camp came alive. The men stirred, lay on their backs, dreamed, talked in small groups. At that early hour no one kept guard: A glance out into the brush now and then, that was all. A cursory feign. It was like waking up in a cancer ward, no one ambitious to get on with the day, no one with obligations, no plans, nothing to hope for, no dreams for the daylight.

"Not a bad night, really," Barney said. "I mean, I was looking for the whole fuckin' Red Army to come thunking down on us. But zilch. A few measly mortar rounds."

Bates shrugged. "Maybe they're out of ammo."

"You think so?"

"Could be," Bates said. "A real possibility."

Barney stared at him, thinking, then he smiled. The idea excited him.

"You really think so?" he said. "Out *completely*?"

"No question about it." Bates put on a solemn face. He was a teaser and he loved going after Barney. "Way I figure it, pal, Uncle Charles shot his whole wad yesterday. Follow me? Boom, it's all gone. So today's *got* to be quiet. Simple logic."

"Yeah," Barney murmured. He kept wagging his head, stirring his ham and eggs. "Yeah."

"We wore 'em out. A war of fucking attrition."

Things were peaceful. There was only the sky and the heat and the coming day. Mornings were good. We ate slowly. No reason to hurry, no reason to move. The day would be yesterday. Village would lead to village, and our feet would hurt, and we would do the things we did, and the day would end.

"Sleep okay?" Bates said.

"Until two hours ago. Something woke me up. Weird—sounded like somebody trying to kill me."

"Yeah," Barney said. "Sometimes I have bad dreams too."

And we gathered up our gear, doused the fires, saddled up, and found our places in the single file line of march. We left the hill and moved down into the first village of the day.

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## 2

### Pro Patria

I grew out of one war and into another. My father came from leaden ships of sea, from the Pacific theater; my mother was a WAVE. I was the offspring of the great campaign against the tyrants of the 1940's, one explosion in the Baby Boom, one of millions come to replace those who had just died. My bawling came with the first throaty note of a new army in spawning. I was bred with the haste and dispatch and careless muscle-flexing of a nation giving bridle to its own good fortune and success. I was fed by the spoils of 1945 victory.

I learned to read and write on the prairies of southern Minnesota.

Along the route used to settle South Dakota and the flatlands of Nebraska and northern Iowa, in the cold winters, I learned to use ice skates.

My teachers were brittle old ladies, classroom football coaches, flushed veterans of the war, pretty girls in sixth grade.

In patches of weed and clouds of imagination, I

suppose. Christ, those tetanus shots *hurt*, don't they?"

As it turned out, the fire fight had not been a fire fight. The blond soldier and a few others had been bored. Bored all day. Bored that night. So they'd synchronized watches, set a time, agreed to toss hand grenades outside our perimeter at 2200 sharp, and when 2200 came, they did it, staging the battle. They shouted and squealed and fired their weapons and threw hand grenades and had a good time, making noise, scaring hell out of everyone. Something to talk about in the morning.

"Great little spat," they said the next day, slyly.

"Great?" I couldn't believe it.

"Ah, you know. Little action livens up everything, right? Gets the ol' blood boiling."

"You crazy?"

"Mad as a hatter."

"You like getting shot, for God's sake? You *like* Charlie trying to chuck grenades into your foxhole? You *like* that stuff?"

"Some got it, some don't. Me, I'm mad as a hatter."

"Don't let him shit you," Chip said. "That whole thing last night was a fake. They planned it, beginning to end."

"Except for old Turnip Head getting a piece of his own grenade," Bates said. "They didn't plan that." Bates walked along beside me, the platoon straggled out across a wide rice paddy. "Turnip Head threw his grenade and it hit a tree and bounced right back at him. Lucky he didn't blow his head off."

Chip shook his head. He was a short, skinny soldier from Orlando, Florida, a black guy. "Me, I don't

# 4

## Nights

"Incoming," the lieutenant shouted.

We dove for a foxhole. I was first in, the earth taking care of my belly; the lieutenant and some others piled in on top of me.

Grenades burst around the perimeter, a few rifle shots.

"Wow, like a sandwich," I said. "Just stay where you are."

"We're nothing but sandbags for O'Brien," Mad Mark said, peering up to watch the explosions go off.

It didn't last long.

A blond-headed soldier ran over when the shooting ended. "Jesus, I got me a hunk of grenade shrapnel in my fuckin' hand," he said. He sucked the wound. It didn't seem bad.

Mad Mark inspected the cut under a flashlight. "Will it kill you before morning?"

"Nope, I guess not. Have to get a tetanus shot, I



take chances like that. You're right, they're nutty," he said.

We walked along. Forward with the left leg, plant the foot, lock the knee, arch the ankle. Push the leg into the paddy, stiffen the spine. Let the war rest there atop the left leg: the rucksack, the radio, the hand grenades, the magazines of golden ammo, the rifle, the steel helmet, the jingling dogtags, the body's own fat and water and meat, the whole contingent of warring artifacts and flesh. Let it all perch there, rocking on the left leg, fastened and tied and anchored by latches and zippers and snaps and nylon cord.

Packhorse for the soul. The left leg does it all. Scolded and trained. The left leg stretches out with magnificent energy, long muscle. Lumbers ahead. It's the strongest leg, the pivot. The right leg comes along, too, but only a companion. The right leg unfolds, swings out, and the right foot touches the ground for a moment, just quickly enough to keep pace with the left, then it weakens and raises on the soil a pattern of desolation.

Arms move about, taking up the rhythm.

Eyes sweep the rice paddy. Don't walk there, too soft. Not there, dangerous, mines. Step there and there and there, not there, step there and there and there, careful, careful, watch. Green ahead. Green lights, go. Eyes roll in the sockets. Protect the legs, no chances, watch for the fuckin' snipers, watch for ambushes and punji pits. Eyes roll about, looking for mines and pieces of stray cloth and bombs and threads and things. Never blink the eyes, tape them open.

The stomach is on simmer, low flame. Fire down inside, down in the pit, just above the balls.

"Watch where you sit, now," the squad leader said. We stopped for shade. "Eat up quick, we're stopping for five minutes, no more."

"Five minutes? Where's the whips and chains?" Bates picked a piece of ground to sit on.

"Look," the squad leader sighed. "Don't get smart ass. I take orders, you know. Sooner we get to the night position, sooner we get resupplied, sooner we get to sleep, sooner we get this day over with. Sooner everything." The squad leader cleaned his face with a rag, rubbed his neck with it.

Barney joined us. "Why we stopping now?"

"Good," the squad leader said. "Someone here understands it's better to keep moving."

Bates laughed, an aristocrat. "I don't know about Buddy Barney, but actually, I was dreaming on the march. I was right in the middle of one. Daughter of this famous politician and me. Had her undressed on a beach down in the Bahamas. Jesus." He gestured vaguely, trying to make us see, sweeping away the heat with his hand. "Had her undressed, see? Her feet were just in the water, these luscious waves lapping up all around her toes and through the cracks between them, and she had this beach towel under her. The only thing she was wearing was sunglasses."

"You really think about politicians' daughters out here?" Barney asked.

"Lovely," Bates said. He closed his eyes.

We ate our noon C rations, then walked up a trail until the end of day.

We dug foxholes and laid our ponchos out.

Dark came. The mountains to the west dissolved—bright red, then pink, then gold, then gray, then

gone—and Quang Ngai, the land, seemed to fold into itself. There were creases in the dusk: reflections, mysteries, ghosts. The land moved. Hedges and boulders and chunks of earth—they *moved*. Things shimmered and fluttered. Distortions? Or a special sort of insight, nighttime clarity? Grouped around our holes, we would focus on the dark. Squint, peer, concentrate. We would seek out shapes in the dark. Impose solidity. We would squeeze our eyes shut. What we could not see, we imagined. Then—only then—we would see the enemy. We would see Charlie in our heads: oiled up, ghostly, blending with the countryside, part of the land. We would listen. What was that sound coming from just beyond the range of vision? A hum? Chanting? We would blink and rub our eyes and wonder about the magic of this place. Levitation, rumblings in the night, shadows, hidden graves.

Now, with the dark solid, Bates and Barney and Chip and I kept the watch from a foxhole along the north perimeter.

The talk was hushed.

"Yeah," Barney was saying, "it's called a starlight scope. I been humping the mother for a week now. Must weigh a ton."

Barney pulled the scope from its black carrying case and handed it across to Chip.

"See there?" Barney said. "A ton, right?"

Chip held the machine, testing its weight. The scope was maybe two feet long, shaped like a blunt telescope, painted black. It looked like something out of science fiction.

"Dammed if I know how it works," Barney said.

"Fucking kaleidoscope or something."

"A stargazing gizmo," Chip said. He held the scope up to his eye. "Star light, star bright."

Bates laughed. "You got to take off the lens cap, man."

"Who needs it? I see fine. Real fine. First star I see tonight, wish I may—"

Bates grabbed the scope, removed the lens cap, and began fiddling with the dials.

"Wish I may, wish I might," Chip chanted, "have the wish I wish tonight."

"Shit," Bates said.

The machine's insides were top secret, but the principle seemed simple enough: Use the night's orphan light—stars, moon glow, reflections, faraway fires—to turn night into day. The scope contained a heavy battery that somehow juiced up the starlight, intensifying it, magically exposing the night's secrets.

Bates finished tinkering with the scope and handed it back to Chip.

"That better?"

"Wow."

"What's out there?"

"A peep show," Chip murmured. "Sweet, sweet stuff. Dancing soul sisters." He giggled and stared through the scope. "Star light, star bright."

"Don't hog it, man."

"Dreamland!"

"Come on, what do you see?"

"All the secrets. I see 'em all out there."

"Hey—"

"Fairy-tale land," Chip whispered. He was quiet for a time. He held the machine tight to his eye, scanning the night, clucking softly. "I see. Yeah, now I see."

"Evil."

"No, it's sweet, real nice." Chip giggled. "I see a circus. No shit, there's a circus out there. Charlie's all dressed up in clown suits. Oh, yeah, a real circus."

And we took turns using the startlight scope. First Bates, then Barney, then me. It was peculiar. The night was there for us to see. A strange, soft deadness. Nothing moved. That was one of the odd things—through the scope, nothing moved. The colors were green. Bright, translucent green like the instrument panel in a jet plane at night.

"It's not right," Bates murmured. "Seeing at night—there's something evil about it."

"Star light, star bright."

"And where's Charlie? Where's the fucking Grim Reaper?"

"First star I see tonight. Wish I may, wish I might, have the wish I wish tonight."

Chip went off to sleep. Soon Barney joined him, and together Bates and I used the scope.

I watched the green dancing night.

"I wish for peace," Bates said.

A green fire. The countryside burned green at night, and I saw it. I saw the clouds move. I saw the vast, deep sleep of the paddies. I saw how the land was just the land.

I laughed, and Bates laughed, and soon the lieutenant came over and told us to quiet down.

We put the scope back in its case.

"Who needs it?" Bates said.

For a time we just sat there. We watched the dark grow on itself, and we let our imaginations do the rest.

Then I crawled into my poncho, lay back, and said good night.

Bates cradled his rifle. He peered out at the dark.

"Night," he said.