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“Not to Be Loved but to Lead”: Homosocial Soldiering in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*

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“Not to Be Loved but to Lead”: Homosocial Soldiering in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*

Cliffton M. Young

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GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study explores the presence of homosocial bonds for Tim O'Brien's characters in his short story collection, *The Things They Carried*, and examines the value of them for soldiers in and out of the war theatre. Their vulnerabilities and fragilities create for the soldiers false fronts of masculinity, and they attain comfort in and attach themselves to others with whom they share military experiences. Members of Alpha Company deal with both physical and mental burdens stemming from battle. Their timidity and emotional / physical ineptness complicate their being able to have honest and affectionate interactions with other men in the platoon, in spite of needing those in order to ease anxiety, fear, and self-doubt. Soldiers generally find civilians unable to recognize the burdens and trials soldiers bear: loved ones cannot understand their being scared and / or uninterested in taking part in war; their longing for and need to escape to what was left behind, and most importantly, their striving against emasculative moments. The final focus in the paper considers transitioning among the Alpha Company men from soldier to civilian, highlighting the difficulties of acclimating to peace-time society. Many of the men feel inadequate, unsure how to position themselves in a society that has drastically changed since they left it—and since they have been left behind by it. O'Brien's characters—himself included—are caught between fantasy and reality, a forced rift between some ideal of comradeship and the reality of patriarchal and national images they have been expected to embrace. The need to excel in war in a manly way proves to be the heaviest weight the men have carried, but the homosocial bonds the soldiers form during war create formidable and lasting ties that sustain these men, permitting them to stay above the killing and destruction that embodied Vietnam.

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Introduction

At the corner of Michigan and Trumbull in Detroit, Michigan, once stood Tiger Stadium, home of Major League Baseball's Detroit Tigers. For fans growing up in the state, it was church. I watched Lou Whitaker and Alan Trammell turn majestic double-plays. I heard the velvety tones of the great Ernie Harwell, long-time radio voice for the club, narrate beautiful stories of Willie Hernandez, Dan Petry, Arelio Lopez, and Jack Morris stifling hitters. And I saw Kirk Gibson hit a Goose Gossage offering over the stadium's roof, sending my heroes to a 1984 World Series championship. The memories still bring goosebumps to my arms. Located in the Corktown neighborhood of Detroit, the Stadium's nine acres and 52,416 seat capacity were larger than life. When the Tigers were playing, the whole world seemed to fit inside and revolve around that space. But in 1999, at the age of eighty-seven, she saw her last game.

I went to the Tigers Opening Day in 2018, now at Comerica Park, and before the game was able to take a spin down memory lane and walk by the hallowed grounds that were the ball park of my youth. The stadium that had housed so many memories from so many games, played by so many iconic players in front of so many people was torn down in 2009. What now stands in this space is a small facility owned by the Detroit Police Athletic League. It is clean, and it is kempt, unlike much of the deteriorating city, but what struck me that day was how small the space seemed. There were a few scattered seats, a couple of dugouts. There was grass, bases, infield dirt, and a fence in the outfield. But it all seemed so insignificant. Without the three levels of seats containing screaming fans, the over-hang that jutted out in center field 440 feet from home plate, and the Old English "D" adorning the area between the plate and backstop, it was pretty non-descript. It was just any other field. Just grass and dirt. I would never see it as the

place where Tiger Stadium once stood. Like the Stadium, this complex occupied part of a city block, but unlike the Stadium, it commands no attention.

It was a surprising realization, a disturbing visual. My perception shattered because of the reality standing directly in front of me. This same juxtaposition occurs within the wartime soldier. These warriors are remembered as eagerly running into battle to protect their great nation and its inhabitants. They loom as larger-than-life figures. They did run into conflict and place themselves in harm's way for the needs of their country and were heroic for doing so—that is fact—but maybe they were not as ready and bold as history and national folklore say they were. Like the land of Tiger Stadium was just a field in Corktown, the men who fought in Vietnam were just men, not robust killing machines. They were normal kids terrified of what was in front of them. The perception didn't fit the reality.

To this day, says Peter McNerney, “Vietnam is as much a state of mind as a place or event. It is a kind of mystery which cannot be represented or even adequately named by straight or exterior history” (191). American citizens, historians, and soldiers struggle to come to grips with the Vietnam War. To this day, it remains a polarizing event. Facts surrounding the conflict were murky for civilians or prospective enlistees/draftees, and what to be believed was never certain, as “[q]uestions about the authenticity and meaning of facts about the Vietnam War tormented interested observers and participants in that conflict while the United States Military was firmly engaged there during the ten-year period 1964 to 1973” (191). Vietnam's Prime Minister, Ho Chi Minh, even used America's history against itself, referring to America as the British, Vietnamese allies as the Tories, and the NLF (National Liberation Front) and North Vietnamese as the patriots, or Americans. The uncertain credibility of the Johnson administration

and what could be believed or not believed was anything but clear, and unfortunately, this trickled down the proverbial hill, negatively affecting the brave men who battled.

The American effort, viewed even by its own people, was arrogant, employing “a specifically Western prejudice . . . Johnson wanted to Americanize the war and the Vietnamese people” (195). The soldiers fighting the politician’s war became the scapegoat. Those fortunate enough to make it home alive were not universally welcomed and cheered; many were jeered and treated like anything but heroes returning from battle. While these realities hardened and deflated those involved in Vietnam, the incidents were unique and helped form bonds between the men, as the intensity and ferocity of them were experiences they would never again encounter. Because of Vietnam’s “secret” history, there is no better way to understand it than to get it “straight” from someone who fought it, someone who lived it. O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*, says McInerney, provides just that: “A writer’s job is to tell the truth. His standard of fidelity to the truth should be so high that his invention, out of his experience, should produce a truer account than anything factual can be. For facts can be observed badly; but when a good writer is creating something, he has time and scope to make of it an absolute truth” (xiv). *The Things They Carried* is classified as psychological fiction, but this fiction is O’Brien’s loose memoir; it is his truth and a part of his autobiography. Because a particular event didn’t happen doesn’t mean it isn’t true. Names are switched, and identities are protected, but this war recollection is O’Brien’s invite to readers and a clear articulation of his Vietnam.

The Things They Carried’s epigraph is taken from John Ransom’s *Andersonville Diary* and reads as follows: “This book is essentially different from any other that has been published concerning the ‘late war’ or any of its incidents. Those who have had any such experience as the author’s will see its truthfulness at once, and to all other readers it is commended as a statement

of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest.” O’Brien’s collection draws from his service in the war, as he says in “Good Form” that “a long time ago I walked through Quang Ngai as a foot soldier” (171). He confesses that stories and events are made up in the aforementioned piece and also in “How to Tell a True War Story.” O’Brien admits, “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth. . . . What stories can do, I guess, is make things present. . . . I can attach faces to grief and love and pity and God. I can make myself feel again” (171, 172). Sure, there may be embellishment, but if one cannot “Google” it or “YouTube” it, can’t it be true? The gist is still powerful, and he wants his readers to think his stories are exact. They contain accurate, hard things: Henry Dobbins fights in battles. Rat Kiley and Curt Lemon share war duties. Jimmy Cross and the author carry heavy emotional loads. O’Brien asks the reader to see how things happened, to explore his trauma, and to experience what ‘Nam was like. The book is done so well. It feels like non-fiction—that’s how true it seems. He put his experiences in his own words because he wants them to make sense. O’Brien wrote *The Things They Carried* because *it* happened, and he wants his readers to know.

Tim O’Brien’s twenty-two short stories in *The Things They Carried* stem from his decision to accept being drafted to serve in Vietnam, the drama of which is started in “On the Rainy River.” As James Nagel points out in *The Contemporary American Short-Story Cycle*, *The Things They Carried* is a “progression of events, tracing a pattern with flashbacks that show the struggle to decide whether to go to Vietnam, the early deaths of [fellow soldiers] . . . and . . . attempts to leave the war behind him and get on with a healthy civilian life” (152). Stefania Ciocia echoes Nagel, saying O’Brien’s stories “ultimately highlight a sense of discontinuity and/or lack of closure, precisely because they send readers on a tantalizing quest for coherence

and unity . . . [and focus on] big themes of the narrative (love, courage, fear, responsibility) . . .” (83, 87). O’Brien’s short-story cycle does not follow a chronological set of events like a novel would; what it does connect to, though, is a group of young soldiers who share strong emotional ties—positive and negative—and what the author does is “recogniz[e] and revea[l] the ‘secret’ of [a] ‘straight’ reconstruction” of his Vietnam (McInerney 194). Christopher Michael McDonough, in his 2000 “‘Afraid to Admit We Are Not Achilles’: Facing Hector’s Dilemma in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*,” says that from “On the Rainy River,” the “central concern [of the cycle] . . . is the shifting and indefinite line which divides bravery from cowardice (as well as honor from shame)” (24). The set of O’Brien’s stories portrays his “[a]ctual experience . . . in each [selection and] recalls, selects, and orders details of actual experience . . .” (McInerney 197). The men of Alpha Company are in Vietnam not because they want to be but because they have to be. *The Things They Carried* is a collection of stories about war, what men do in it, and what it does to them.

Their governmental obligation physically keeps them in Vietnam, but their homosocial bonds help them navigate the war. Tyson denotes homosocial bonding as “same-sex friendship of the kind seen in . . . male-bonding activities. The depiction of strong emotional ties between same-sex characters can create a homosocial atmosphere . . . [that] foregrounds the profound importance of same-sex emotional ties in the development of human identity and community” (307, 324-325). They lean on, look after, and rely on one another. These men have left all they know: their loved ones, their routines, and their identities. These new relationships seal the fissures created by the war. For the most part, these bonds are helpful, but because these unions are “forcibly manufactured,” the relationships are oftentimes precarious. Many of the soldiers detest and fight against the men beside them. This dynamic is evident in “Style”; O’Brien,

Dobbins, and other Alpha members are disgusted watching Azar ridicule survivors of a bombed-out village (O'Brien 130), but O'Brien later uses Azar's negative traits to his advantage, as the two men scheme and exact revenge on the medic, Jorgensen, who botched O'Brien's war wound (193). Strunk and Jensen have a vicious fight in "Enemies." Jensen accuses Strunk of taking his jackknife, and the bigger man, Jensen, savagely beats Strunk. Jensen fears retribution from Strunk because of the incident, and this stress births reconciliation between the two men, bringing them closer together, so much so that it creates the next story, "Friends," where the two make a pact to care for each other in case of a catastrophic injury (59-62). The positives from this bond, though, are short-lived, as each man worries he will have to follow through with the agreement, which is to mercifully end the life of the crippled man (63). And in "The Dentist," the men enjoy watching Lemon—a man not well-liked or respected—squirm and fidget while waiting to see an army dentist. They enjoy seeing his fragility. He holds a high opinion of himself, so seeing him vulnerable is a welcomed sight (82). While men like Azar and Lemon ostracize their platoon mates, Alpha's shared war duties inevitably connect its soldiers. When Lemon is killed later in the war, because each man is susceptible to this fate, it "was easy to get sentimental about the dead" (83). The bonds are sometimes fraught, but this sense of belonging to a community of men is a connector, and the men relate to each other—not always to country or community—and this is an aid to their war experience.

O'Brien has two bad options: go to a war he does not believe in or flee to Canada and abandon the only world he knows—his hometown community—and any respect he has within it. Chris Vanderwees, in "Resisting Remasculinization: Tim O'Brien's 'Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong'" (2009), insists, "Soldiers . . . attempt to perform a variety of masculine ideals and appearances to uphold a reputation of manliness so not to appear unnaturally or abnormally

feminine” (194). The “Re” in Vanderwees’s title means that for the author, and for so many of the men of Alpha, they are constantly trying to maintain the ideal, or societal image of soldier, not what they naturally are: boys who long for home and an escape from the hell of Vietnam. They fight the Vietnamese, but they also fight having to “re”-masculate, to be what they are expected to be and not what they naturally are, which gives the reader a front-row seat to their vulnerabilities and insecurities. O’Brien’s interaction with Elroy—the metaphorical image of societal and patriarchal pressures not only the author but also his Alpha comrades face—the owner of the riverfront resort on Rainy River, proves that like many of his contemporaries in his platoon, the soon-to-be-soldier is not the rugged, independent warrior glorified in American myth. Like the other protagonists in the novel, O’Brien’s desire is to be part of the group, to fit in with the other men with whom he shares this experience, not to be a hero or to stand out from the rest. Benedict Anderson comments on this dynamic in his work, *Imagined Communities*: “[I]t is useful to remind ourselves that nations inspire love, and often profoundly self-sacrificing love . . . the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (141, 6). In this context, the “nation” is a community of young men, a group of soldiers, a “fraternity that makes it possible . . . for so many . . . not so much to kill, as willingly die for such limited imaginings” (7). This nation compromises Alpha Company, and their desire, their want, is acceptance and favor from their peers in the battalion, to simply be a player in the “band of brothers.” Anderson continues, “[F]or most ordinary people of whatever class the whole point of the nation is that it is interestless. Just for that reason, it can ask for sacrifices” (144). For the nation, or in this instance the men of Alpha, the “interestless” aim of the group is a win-win. Acting as a unified unit allows for easier sacrifices—“people wholly unknown to each other utter

the same verses to the same melody . . . [h]ow selfless this unisonance feels!” (145)—as each man falls in line and does as the man next to him: walking, fighting, carrying, dying; also, fighting for one’s country carries a moral grandeur and appeases patriarchal and societal pressures facing men like O’Brien, Bowker, and Cross, whose aim is to make their fathers, loved ones, friends, and others like Elroy proud.

“On the Rainy River” creates an order to the novel’s stories and a connection between protagonists that suggests the attraction and the connections the men have toward each other. From the aforementioned story, five subsets produce five sorts of protagonists who share similar plights and characteristics. These plot divisions spotlight the soldiers’ vulnerability and fragility; their posing, false fronts of bravado and masculinity; their sense of emasculation; the sharing of soldierly burdens; and finally, the difficulty in acclimating to the war and their return to the States after it. James Nagel claims, “O’Brien’s skill as a writer of fiction is nowhere more evident than in his ability to preserve these stories as individual aesthetic entities while developing their relational significance as a unified short-story cycle . . . that is aesthetically congruent, thematically powerful, and in many important ways greater than the sum of its component parts” (152) and if the “collective protagonist is Alpha Company, many of the men serve as protagonist of at least one story . . .” (152). Nagel says this “related significance” forms the attraction between the men. The soldiers feel the same pains, fear the same dangers, and yearn for the same bonds. Many of the text’s characters—the young, innocent soldiers of Alpha Company—exhibit fear, psychological weakness, and desperation not favored within the society they inhabit. O’Brien, Cross, and others in the platoon are doubles, and their lives mirror one another’s as they share parallel experiences in the burdens they carry. Escapism is prevalent, as they long for home and what was left behind. The author shows how he, Jimmy Cross, and the

rest of the men close ranks, creating a sense of belonging and a strong camaraderie within the battalion; these homo-social bonds and ensuing relationships guide them through the war.

The collection's homosocial cues represent a thwarting of stereotypical masculine expectations that the Vietnam soldier needed to exemplify, ones imperative to the American male identity. Ross discusses blinders that society wears "when we assume that being born male predisposes one to an intrigue with war. Just as we recognize our preconceptions about 'how gentle and peaceful [women] are' as 'crap,' we must similarly reconsider our notions of men as inherently violent and war-driven" (48). O'Brien is intrigued with going to college and being an academic. Jimmy Cross wants to stay in New Jersey and make a life with Martha. Both are sensitive, reflective men not cut out for this duty. Ciocia recalls what O'Brien said about himself and others in his platoon: "[We] fought because [we] were embarrassed not to, because of the social pressure . . . to do the 'right thing,' and not because of an innate, deep-seated desire to live up to old-fashioned models of heroic masculine behavior" (94). They go to Vietnam only because of the social ramifications. It brings pride and satisfaction to their fathers and their fathers' fathers. They go and fight to please everyone but themselves. McDonough says that O'Brien writes of "the experience of those who must come to grips with the dilemma courage imposes: on the one hand is the loss of face, on the other, loss of life" (31). Every soldier's goal is to stay alive, to make it out of war and to head home, but "loss of face" often is an obstacle to that, as the men, to play on the famous words of Franklin D. Roosevelt, worry about showing fear more than the actual fear itself. To exude and to live by this form of forced and sometimes false masculinity must at times have seemed as big a foe as the enemy and causes many of these men to be alienated and removed from their true selves. O'Brien's characters—himself included—are caught between fantasy and reality, a forced rift between what is ideal and what is

real. Patriarchal and national images bring grandeur and prestige, some pomp and circumstance to the soon-to-be soldiers. There is honor and excitement in being called a GI, in wearing the uniform, and being seen as brave but once in Vietnam, reality sets in. The men's courageousness in signing up and accepting their draft notices is much different than the valor needed to succeed in battle. After the "excitement" settles, there is war and death. The men fight, but life moves along for everyone else. They aren't ready. They aren't killers. They are terrified kids, scared of what they are facing. These men are expected to embrace and excel in war, and that is the heaviest weight the men carry. This proves a very dubious concept to live up to, but the homosocial bonds the soldiers form during war create formidable and lasting ties allowing the men to navigate the killing and destruction that embodies Vietnam.

A Soldier's Vulnerability and Fragility

O'Brien makes his decision while floating in Elroy's boat on Rainy River, and this creates a connection between stories and the protagonists within them. The author's vulnerability and fragility cause him to search for and attach himself to others with whom he shares these experiences. These burdens detailing struggles because of the war, seen in "The Things They Carried," "The Lives of the Dead," and "Love" primarily connect O'Brien to Lieutenant Cross. O'Brien and Cross, in this triumvirate of stories, deal with both physical and mental burdens stemming from battle. Jon Volkmer's "Telling the 'Truth'" explains that O'Brien's novel "is about grunts, common fighting men who for the most part didn't choose war or want to be in Viet Nam" (250) and that "[t]he war, and all its paraphernalia, are the unhappy load carried on the back of the foot soldiers. The first and eponymous chapter lists pages and pages of things that soldiers carried in the war, items which are used to highlight the soldiers' individualities as much as their commonalities" (241). Cross, O'Brien, and other members of Alpha—again, mostly young men who didn't sign up for this experience—try to honor the past and their lives back home while attempting to deal with the present and the difficulties that exist. Their current situation is regretful, and they all yearn for what they have at home: family, friends, girlfriends, and safety. What these men are carrying and experiencing in Vietnam cannot be replicated back in Jersey or Minnesota; this homophily, which is not interchangeable with homosocial, is a tendency for individuals to search for friendship with those who are similar to them. People love nothing as much as they love themselves, and they seek out others who are most like them. Many Alpha relationships exist because they share so many similarities, and their relationships are strengthened because of the intense hardship in which they find themselves. Another of these likenesses is the pressure they feel to succeed in battle. Lorrie Smith argues that "The things'

[O'Brien's] characters 'carried' to war, it turns out, include plenty of patriarchal baggage" (16). Trying to please their fathers, who tried to please their fathers, is a sizeable weight, one that O'Brien and the others struggle to measure up to, but it is a strain that links the men. Smith echoes Volkmer's claim that each of O'Brien's stories tells the truth about the Vietnam experience, and the narrative of what each man lugs with him is mostly conveyed through the shared language of the men in the battalion, as each soldier "manfully carr[ies] his own weight but also shar[es] the burden of war" (24) that "unmasks the soldiers' macho 'stage presence,' 'pose,' and 'hard vocabulary'" (27). The search for community begins with commonality. O'Brien is attracted to Cross because they share a similar "carry," and the stress from that load provides them a camaraderie and subsequent kinship.

Another reason Cross relates to O'Brien is evident in "In the Lives of the Dead," as O'Brien remembers his first crush, Linda, who died when they were in grade school. He says, "Even then, at nine years old, I wanted to live inside her body. I wanted to melt into her bones—that kind of love" (216). While dealing with different circumstances, both men have romantic notions of love and its loss. For O'Brien, within his memory of Linda, he is attempting to preserve his innocence and what he was before the war. For Cross, Martha also symbolizes what was and what could be as he struggles with his guilt after Ted Lavender is shot and killed under his watch in "The Things They Carried." Of Linda, when O'Brien writes of her decades after her death, "it's tempting to dismiss it as a crush, an infatuation of childhood, but I know for a fact that what we felt for each other was as deep and rich as love can ever get. . . . I just loved her" (216). This is a loose end for O'Brien, and loose ends do not sit well as he looks death in the face on a daily basis. He regrets his shortcomings with Linda, but there is no chance to rectify that. In "Battles Are Always Fought among Human Beings, Not Purposes": Tim O'Brien's Fiction as a

Response to the Crisis of Modernity,” Julie Ooms argues that O’Brien wields the skill “to tell [a] story . . . [about] upheaval at home and the aimless, mine-littered march in Vietnam” (26). He depicts soldiers like himself and Cross “not as cowards or tragic figures, but as particular human beings whose past and present actions haunt them, who fear being called cowards” (27). O’Brien associates with Cross in “The Things They Carried” because of the first lieutenant’s desperation for what he cannot have with Martha. For O’Brien, Linda—or the memories of her—is home, peace, and innocence; she is everything Vietnam isn’t. The author knows Cross wants the same to be true within Martha, as the lieutenant hangs on to the letters sent by her, “tast[ing] the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had been there. More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her, but mostly the letters were mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love” (O’Brien 1). Similar to O’Brien, Cross feels he didn’t do enough; he didn’t secure a hold on Martha’s love, and now that he is thousands of miles away, there is little-to-no hope for it. Ross remarks that Cross and O’Brien do “not imagine fire-fights, ambushes or Silver Stars as [they fight] . . . through the jungle; [they] think . . . of love and sunset walks on the beach” (22-23). This hole for both men is created because neither has someone to go home to, but this parallel connects the two characters and makes them look out for one another, because like O’Brien, Cross’s mind is not on the war but on what he left back home.

Another area of pregnability connecting O’Brien to Cross is created by the two being unable to find closure in their relationships with Linda and Martha, respectively. Both men live with regret for what they didn’t do, for what they weren’t able to do. O’Brien wishes he had done more and been more present: “But in a story I can steal her soul. I can revive, at least briefly, that which is absolute and unchanging. . . . Linda can smile and sit up. She can reach out, touch my wrist, and say, ‘Timmy, stop crying.’ . . . At some point I had come to understand that Linda was

sick, maybe even dying, but I loved her and just couldn't accept it" (224). Age was the determining factor for most of O'Brien's inabilities to navigate the situation of his friend dying. Being nine, he wasn't equipped to navigate emotionally Linda's illness and subsequent death, and while the scars remain and emotions die hard, recalling this childhood experience, O'Brien is not a young man at war in Vietnam, but Pamela Smiley says, "He remains Timmy, his innocent childhood self. The man finds himself in the boy he was, and that hasn't changed at all" (610). O'Brien's insecurities years after his friend's death and his yearning to handle the situation differently, to be able to experience a different outcome, are more ways in which he is drawn to Cross's plight. They can each find comfort knowing the other is clinging to the past and is hoping to find the security and feeling it brought. Cross's relationship with Martha leaves much to be desired for the lieutenant, and his insecurities and regrets place him in a precarious position: "[Cross] should've carried her up the stairs to her room and tied her to the bed . . . He should've risked it. Whenever he looked at the photographs, he thought of new things he should've done. . . . He was just a kid at war, in love. He was twenty-four years old. He couldn't help it" (O'Brien 4, 11). Similar to O'Brien, Cross dreams of a re-do; he wants an ability to go back to take control of the situation and to do what time away from the circumstance and greater maturity show him he should. As Smith states, "His survival as a soldier and a leader depends upon absolute separation from the feminine world and rejection of his own femininity" (26), but like O'Brien, his thoughts of home and of what remains—in either physical or mental form—show him to be insecure and infirm, hardly the quintessential soldier, and while these traits are detriments, they help cement a friendship between the two men, and it helps them grow and maintain their faculties in their numerous toils.

Shared instability creates solidarity and a sense of belonging between Cross and O'Brien. Each of the soldiers serves as his "brother's keeper," strengthening each man's true self and lessening the pressure to live up to the identity expected of a warrior in battle. Both men carry a heavy load—psychologically and physically. After Ted Lavender is killed, Lt. Cross takes the blame. He "felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war" (O'Brien 16), which left him "now determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence. It wouldn't help Lavender, he knew that, but from this point on . . . his obligation was not to love but to lead" (24-25). Lynne Hanley notices that "[o]ne recurrent strategy upholding masculine innocence in war literature, rests on 'the idea that men go to war not really knowing that killing other people is what war is all about. And the story that keeps this idea alive and close to our hearts is the story of the soldier's tragic discovery on the battlefield that what he is part of is killing'" (27). This reality is the crux of Cross's instability. He knows he wasn't completely invested, and because of that, Lavender is dead. His epiphany is that his men, not Martha, need to be at the forefront. And as Alex Vernon says in *Soldiers Once and Still: Ernest Hemingway, James Salter, and Tim O'Brien*, "Tim O'Brien [and Cross] obeyed [their] authoritarian conscience instead of [their] humanitarian one, the one that [said] fighting and killing in Vietnam was wrong" (204). For soldiers like O'Brien and Cross, the "non-career . . . enlisted personnel and junior officers who constitute the majority of those who fight wars," theorizes Vernon in another piece, his 2002 "Submission and Resistance to the Self as Soldier: Tim O'Brien's Vietnam War Memoir," "military service is a kind of exile from one's real life" (161). Hurt and regret result from their masculine innocence. There is timidity for these men when they are not physically or emotionally adept to fulfill what they are there to do:

kill a man on the other side of the line and/or deal with the deaths of those around them. The emotional significance creates the heaviest toll, but to have an honest, similar attachment to another man in the platoon eases the anxiety and self-doubt. This pain is never erased, as O'Brien discusses in "Love" a meeting he had with Cross: "At one point, I remember, we paused over a snapshot of Ted Lavender, and after a while Jimmy rubbed his eyes and said he'd never forgiven himself for Lavender's death. It was something that would never go away, he said quietly, and I nodded and told him I felt the same about certain things" (O'Brien 26). The author relates to Cross's guilt in a passage from "The Lives of the Dead." O'Brien feels a sense of shame for avoiding death: "For three hours we carried the bodies down the mountain to a clearing alongside a narrow dirt road. . . . They were all badly bloated. . . . They were heavy. Their feet were bluish green and cold. The smell was terrible. . . . Mitchell Sanders looked at me and said . . . '[d]eath sucks'" (230). O'Brien bonds with Cross because he relates to his hurt and regret and carries the same wounds that Cross does. The men share the same loads, the same fears, the same choices or lack thereof, the same naiveté, and as Susan Farrell says, O'Brien's novel "is about the inevitable guilt associated with war deaths and what soldiers do with that guilt" (3). For soldiers, this is such a taboo subject, so for Cross and O'Brien to be able to broach it gives them an outlet to handle the responsibilities war forced upon them.

Military duties—tasks apart from a general sense of regret for doing damage to the people and the land—create more heavy weights for Cross, O'Brien, and the other members of Alpha to lug. O'Brien demonstrates "a recognition of how expectations of masculine performance impinge on how men respond to fear, death, love, and war" (Ross 13). They haul many mental burdens, like regret, panic, and frustration, and the physical obligations are just as daunting. Cross and O'Brien spend most of their days humping through the jungle: "The things

they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the near-necessities were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags . . . candy, cigarettes, salt tabs . . . lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water” (O’Brien 2). The author lists the series of items and the myriad commas to show all that is asked of the men and to represent the toughness and strength required on each soldier’s part. They “carried steel helmets that weighed 5 pounds . . . They carried the standard fatigue jackets and trousers. . . . On their feet they carried jungle boots—2.1 pounds” (2). Specific items are described, and exact weights are listed, and this allows their strains, their desires to be masculine, tough, and strong to be felt by each other, to be introduced to the reader, as they carried “all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried” (7).

The men’s physical tasks are not as laborious as transporting the emotional cargo. Sexual longing, emotional instabilities, and the distractions those cause are a threat to each GI’s masculinity. Ross says that “O’Brien and his many characters seek liberation from what they perceive to be the stifling expectations of masculinity, and feel that gaining the love and understanding of women offers the potential for escape from those nerve-wracking demands” (19). O’Brien writes of Cross’s many daydreams. The lieutenant pines for Martha: “Her legs, he thought, were almost certainly the legs of a virgin, dry and without hair, the left knee cocked and carrying her entire weight, which was just over 117 pounds. [He] remembered touching that left knee . . . [and] he should have done something brave” (O’Brien 4). But, because women are not available to them, and through correspondence oftentimes are not able to empathize, the men search for each other. With this, Vernon continues in *Soldiers Once and Still*, “[T]he language of sexual desire and union . . . and Lavender’s death, links Jimmy’s imagination—his merging with

the feminine—with the annihilation of the self” (252). Members of the platoon have these regrets, these sexual frustrations that hinder their abilities to concentrate on battle, such as Cross blaming himself for Lavender’s death because of his daydreaming of the girl back home (O’Brien 24), but for Cross and other members of Alpha Company, their memories of women back in the States, their longing for them, threaten their masculinity and expected identities. Not to seem weak and uninvolved, they often suppress these feelings and desires and instead of talking about them, men like Cross daydream to relieve the subsequent stress and to avoid appearing soft, and as John H. Timmerman remarks, “[S]oldiers dream; they pretend and deny in order to diminish the horror” (103). The men bond, but these relationships don’t always compensate for what they lack and what they are searching for: Their “love was too much for [them,] [they] felt paralyzed, [and they] wanted to sleep inside [their girlfriends’] lungs and breathe [their] blood and be smothered” (O’Brien 11), but to be there for their brothers-in-arms, to stay alive and to return to what they long for, Cross and O’Brien “would police up their acts. They would get their shit together, and keep it together, and maintain it neatly and in good working order” (24). The soldiers share psychological effects from battles and the stresses from treacherous duty. In “The Things They Carried,” Lee Strunk enters a dark tunnel opening. He is called to clear it, allowing the platoon to move forward in their hump. It is his turn to crawl into a situation that is much more tenuous than the normal peril the group is in. Cross and O’Brien share excitement that it is Strunk—not them—going into the hole: “As they waited, the men smoked and drank Kool-Aid . . . feeling sympathy for Lee Strunk but also feeling the luck of the draw. You win some, you lose some, said Mitchell Sanders, and sometimes you settle for a rain check” (10). The task is not a physical tax, but it is definitely a mental one. The darkness of the opening, not knowing what is on the other side, is Pandora’s Box. Cross and O’Brien watching,

not participating, is an intense link, one they are both relieved to avoid, and the gravity of the moment—both in escaping it and worrying about Sanders—strengthens their connection.

The social construction of masculinity, the one conditioned by years of John Wayne and other “tough-guy” movies, is exposed. In “Locating Masculinity: Some Recent Work on Men,” Robert A. Nye indicates that “boys who aspire to manhood, and men seeking to express theirs, follow masculine scripts generated in and for particular milieus, but they must also negotiate their course in relation to the hegemonic forms of contemporary masculinity and femininity” (1940). The Alpha soldiers bond by not fulfilling this creed. They aren’t John Wayne. They aren’t what their grandfathers say they were, and this helps unify them and relieve the pressure they feel. Cross and O’Brien carry the “secret of cowardice barely restrained, the instinct to run or freeze or hide, and in many respects this was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down . . . They carried the soldier’s greatest fear . . . the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to” (O’Brien 20). Carl S. Horner refers to another war novel from O’Brien, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, in his 1999 “Challenging the Law of Courage and Heroic Identification in Tim O’Brien’s *If I Die in a Combat Zone* and *The Things They Carried*, saying that “[b]lind or obsessive duty for the sake of honor, God, and country might be bravery to a fault, or nothing more than ‘manliness, crudely idealized’” (256). This situation “unmasks the soldiers’ macho ‘stage presence, pose, and [hard] vocabulary’” (Smith 30), proof that the real identity of these soldiers does not fit the one that is expected, the one that is idealized. Like Strunk, O’Brien and Cross perform tasks because “‘they were embarrassed not to’; they do what they ‘felt they had to do’” (31). The romanticism of being what they were supposed to be, a brave and fearless soldier, is a commanding entity. Not getting a part in that movie is a damaging reality, but so is power in numbers. Cross, O’Brien, and the others feel a

sense of relief that they are not alone when it comes to shying away from danger, and sharing these similarities relieves some of the daily tension they face.

The members of Cross's crew also share responsibilities and pressures to help and to take care of each other not only on the battlefield but also off it. The "pressures were enormous. In the heat of early afternoon, they would remove their helmets and flak jackets, walking bare, which was dangerous but helped ease their strain" (O'Brien 15). They "carried each other, the wounded or weak. . . . They marched for the sake of the march. They plodded along slowly, dumbly, leaning against the heat, unthinking, all blood and bone, simple grunts, soldiering with their legs, toiling up the hills and down into the paddies . . . because it was automatic, it was anatomy . . . [and] the hump was everything" (14). O'Brien does so because it is expected; he asks no questions and marches because his lieutenant demands it of him. Each member of Alpha walks, humps, and looks out for the man next to him because he knows the man in front or behind him will do the same. A group identity is forming, and these homosocial bonds make the men of Alpha Company a community. There is a steep significance to the situation, a responsibility that O'Brien has to Cross, that Cross has to O'Brien, and all the men have for each member of the Company: "Men who charge the enemy despite their fear of death 'are remembered as brave, win or lose'" (Horner 258). And similarly, Cross looks at each man he commands as having that same soldierly purpose. Each soldier carries the same burden as the next man. This is bolstered by Dimitri Bikos: "It serves to place blame not on an individual but on the whole unit thereby further cementing the idea of group mentality" (245). Each man is going through the same experience as his brother beside him. This sense of purpose and motivation help to alleviate the weight and anxiety placed on the platoon's soldiers.

The soldiers often carry themselves during battle with poise and exude the masculine persona expected of their position, but at times, Cross and O'Brien fail in this task. Pride falters; the men try to be hard, macho, but as the bullets fly in one of O'Brien's first battles, he remembers the true identity and softness of many of his fellow Alpha mates: "Now and then . . . they twitched and made moaning sounds and covered their heads and said Dear Jesus . . . and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop . . . and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. . . . They were afraid of dying but they were even more afraid to show it" (O'Brien 18-19). They may be afraid to show it, but when it is revealed, it is respected and comes as a relief for O'Brien and the other men of the Company to see that they are not alone in what they feel and in how they act. The shared acts and emotions bring the men closer. When Cross crumbles after Lavender is shot and killed, the men take notice, and it seems to be a relief for them. Their leader is crying and showing emotion, and it takes the pressure off them to be able to do the same: "'The lieutenant's in some deep hurt. I mean that crying jag—the way he was carrying on—it wasn't fake or anything, it was real heavy-duty hurt. The man cares. . . . 'Say what you want, the man does care'" (17). Two fronts are being fought: man vs. man and man vs. self, and sometimes, the latter is the more formidable opponent. Horner, reflecting on the laws of masculinity, notes, "A man must not cry. He must not whine or complain. Worse, he must not lose control over his emotions or run in the heat of crisis. He must wear the mask of bravery . . . [and the] burden of fear and the shame that he would have to suffer if he let it creep into his face haunted even the toughest soldier of Alpha Company" (260). It haunts a soldier to feel these emotions and to have to repress them, but when they are exposed, as they are in Cross, O'Brien and the others are drawn to that and feel a sense of closeness and endearment to their leader and bear a need to have his back. The men fight so

hard to squelch this unveiled vulnerability, but it serves as a blessing, though, because it frees them from the weight that their posing creates. This stifling heaviness is lessened, and it ultimately allows them to be better, more aware soldiers.

Cross, O'Brien, and the other men share their longing to escape, to be removed from tenuous situations created by war. Ross explains, "The implication is, to borrow a phrase from an Army ad campaign, that to 'be all you can be' as a man, you must eradicate desire for the feminine from your heart and mind. But what O'Brien wants us to understand is that such expectation is cruel, unnatural, and impossible" (23-24). These soldiers cannot block out the mental dissonance created by war and because of this, they search for ways out. It is fight or flight, and they choose to soar. They "imagined the muzzle against flesh. So easy: squeeze the trigger and blow away a toe. They imagined . . . the quick, sweet pain, the evacuation to Japan, then a hospital with warm beds and cute geisha nurses" (O'Brien 21). Ooms imparts on the aforementioned cognitive dissonance. The guys "are terrified of dying, and terrified of what their family and friends and hometowns will think of them if they desert" (32), so the million-dollar injury—blowing off a toe to earn a trip home—is a fantasy they all share. This is another war waged between the soldiers' true selves and the ideal American male, the masculine warrior. The natural thought that comes from the men is, "*Sin loi! . . . I'm sorry, motherfuckers, but I'm out of it, I'm goofed, I'm on a space cruise, I'm gone! . . . over the farms and great sleeping cities . . . and highways and the golden arches of McDonald's, it was flight, a kind of fleeing, a kind of falling . . . Gone! they screamed. I'm sorry but I'm gone!*" (O'Brien 22). Being masculine is not as sexy as being out of Vietnam, safe and out of the war. Each GI wants to support the next man, but the strength of that bond is tested under the weight of wanting out of 'Nam. They share the pipedreams not often discussed because of the soft and feminine connotations that accompany

them. They long to finish their tours. They dream of the lives that await them if they can survive Vietnam.

False Fronts of Masculinity

Each soldier's precarious and at-risk psyche births a sense of artificial machismo and bravado. O'Brien's lingering effects of false masculinity are seen in "Friends" and "Style" and tie him to Dave Jensen, Lee Strunk, and Henry Dobbins. Chris Vanderwees explains, "Masculine behaviour . . . is not inherent, but is rather acted out, performed" (193). O'Brien and the others fake it until they make it. "Making it" works in various ways; one way of making it—the most important, obviously—is simply staying alive. The second, and arguably the most laborious, is the work it takes keeping up the façade of being courageous and fearless in battle. In "Friends," Strunk and Jensen make a pact that if one of them suffers an injury that is a "crippler," the healthy man will kill the wounded soldier. In "Challenging the Law of Courage . . .," C.S. Horner parrots O'Brien: "[G]race under pressure, or the collective male psyche could . . . blind a man into stupidity during the Vietnam War" (256). The men employ this disguise to fit in the group and to gain the confidence of their mates, but earning this bond can end their chance at "making it": trying to be what they are not can get them killed. Anderson explains that these soldiers "are ready to die for these [masculine] inventions" (141). As the bonds strengthen, so do the obligations to each other, and "they did learn to trust each other. . . . They covered each other on patrol, shared a foxhole, took turns pulling guard at night. In late August they made a pact that if one of them should ever get totally fucked up—a wheelchair wound—the other guy would automatically find a way to end it" (O'Brien 62). Being a part of the battalion is synonymous with being part of a family, and their responsibilities to each other created by the homosocial links enable each man to let down his guard and show his vulnerability. This gives him more of a chance to be himself, to drop the persona of the robust, manly caricature expected of a soldier. In *Soldiers Once and Still*, Vernon posits that these pacts "represent, so to speak, an amplified

symbol of the dilemma of choice versus obligation in the midst of a social order where status prevails [and is seen] as an amplified choice versus obligation” (231) that O’Brien and his fellow soldiers face. “Status” is where the difficulty lies and serves as the internal stressor battling the men. On the surface, they would rather appear brave and die than look scared and live, but this is not reality. As fate would have it, Strunk has his leg blown off by a land mine, and as he lies in the field, dying, he looks at Jensen and says, “Oh, Jesus . . . Jesus, man, don’t kill me. . . . I’m *serious*. . . . But you got to promise. Swear it to me—swear you won’t kill me” (O’Brien 63). While the macho agreement before the tragedy is a false show of strength and bravado for both men, the love Strunk and Jensen share for each other allows for a true moment as one man tends to the other. The pact the men share at the battle’s outset positively allows each to carry on the way they feel a soldier should, but the bonds created during their relationship allow for honesty and vulnerability when the decision they never hoped would come to fruition faces them. Negatively, though, before Strunk dies, Jensen is terrified he will have to follow through on his word to kill Strunk after his crippling wound. He is relieved by Strunk’s unwillingness to be shot. Neither man is capable of fulfilling his end of the bargain, proving the fragility of the agreement.

Just as O’Brien wanted Elroy to view him as a brave soldier, a man’s man, Strunk and Jensen’s agreement is established under a pretense of bravery. Horner points out,

Throughout gender history, men have been pressured to react to deadly crisis according to the sacred rules of a male honor code. From Odysseus to King Arthur, from Ulysses to George Washington, and from Aeneas to Norman Schwarzkopf, clearly the most widely accepted values of integrity, dignity, respect, self-respect, valor, and thus unquestioned masculinity hinge upon a commissioned response to fear and duty. (257)

It's a "commissioned response"; essentially, it's a gentleman's form of extortion. Strunk's and Jensen's shared affinity creates a false arrangement both men easily renege. O'Brien has an attachment to Strunk and Jensen because of it: "Later we heard that Strunk died somewhere over Chu Lai, which seemed to relieve Dave Jensen of an enormous weight" (O'Brien 63). Jensen's weight, the internal war being his burden to honor his word, to fulfill Strunk's wishes and abide by the code he feels he has to follow, is "the mask of bravery in all conflict. The burden of fear and the shame that he would have to suffer if he let it creep into his face haunted even the toughest soldier in Alpha Company. . . . Certainly, under the crushing weight of stress, violence, and ordinance, the male role 'was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down'" (Horner 260-261). Strunk dying, crassly put, allows Jensen to save face, as he is falsely able to retain his masculinity and not have to someday face Strunk, not capable of doing what he agreed he would.

Dobbins is confronted by the weight of this front—the burden of falling short of societal pressures in being the ideal male/soldier—in "Style" and connects to Jensen and Strunk from "Friends." The Company comes upon the destruction of war. Outside a blown-up home, a little girl dances. O'Brien admires Dobbins for the way he chastises fellow soldier Azar because of Azar's mocking of a little girl who has survived the bombing. Many of the men have "[a]nxiety over the general incommunicability of trauma" (Smith 19) and for Azar, his "masculinity rejects all qualities relating to the feminine . . . [and] to embody masculinity is to be hard, cold, courageous, active, and ready to fight" (Vanderwees 194), and "[p]art of the tragedy of these soldier's experience in Vietnam is that the war has taught them that macho posturing . . . [is] the norm" (Farrell 8). Dobbins is unwilling to take part in this "posturing" and refuses to watch Azar degrade and demean the young orphaned girl. O'Brien says, "That night, after we'd marched

away from the smoking village, Azar mocked the girl's dancing. He did funny jumps and spins. . . . But Henry Dobbins, who moved gracefully for such a big man, took Azar from behind and lifted him up high and carried him over to a deep well and asked him if he wanted to be dumped in" (O'Brien 130). Dobbins threatens Azar for his taunting of the tragedy; he makes it okay for the other men to desist in the macho pretentiousness seemingly expected and encouraged in that situation. Azar's actions are scrutinized in Smiley's "The Role of the Ideal (Female) Reader," which connects to Horner's piece. First is Azar's—and many other soldiers,' for that matter—"separation from . . . [a] civilizing influence. Second is the performance of masculinity according to traditional standards involving bravery, physical prowess, and virility. And third is the company of men, particularly the wizened sergeant (or some other father figure) who pronounces the young soldier 'a man'" (603). For O'Brien, seeing Dobbins, in a sense, correct and discipline Azar helps lessen the façade he has to maintain. His friend's act allows O'Brien to stay above the ruthlessness and anarchy that war breeds. Bikos says, "This idea that the seeds for the masculine heroic model are planted at childhood is echoed throughout *The Things They Carried*" (244). Dobbins is saddened by the war and the destruction within it, and as Lorrie Smith says, "In the end, men *are* how they act, just as they *are* their stories and culture *is* its myths" (27). O'Brien is charmed by his approach and wants to be a part of his "community," his respect for the dead, and his not taking part in the false bravado of Azar's masking of the day's effects. Looking at the context of Azar's actions through the friendship of Jensen and Strunk in "Friends," O'Brien "demonstrates [his] recognition of how expectations of masculine performance impinge on how men respond to fear, death, love, and war . . . [and] conveys this understanding by creating characters and stories that subtly controvert stereotypical masculine expectations by unapologetically revealing the soft underbelly of men" (13). Azar's actions are a pose, a front, an

“attempt to perform a variety of masculine ideals and appearances to uphold a reputation of manliness so as not to appear unnaturally or abnormally feminine” (Vanderwees 194), but Dobbins’s reaction to Azar’s conduct, his embracing of his own “soft underbelly,” is endearing to O’Brien and reduces his anxiety caused by the weight of carrying around his insincere and artificial manliness.

Emasculated Moments

O'Brien shows that with insincere and put-on masculinity, what follows are unnerving moments of weakness and embarrassment for many within Alpha Company. These emasculated instances continue in "Stockings," "The Man I Killed," "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong," "In the Field," and "Night Life," as O'Brien again connects to Jimmy Cross and Henry Dobbins, but also with Rat Kiley and Mark Fossie. The author is drawn to them because they are not killers, but humane men who are not meant to be soldiers. These GIs are not ready for, able, or wanting to kill or die—the war is an unnatural place for them, just as it is for O'Brien. Being in battle goes against their nature. In the same way, Horner wonders if war is just an adrenaline rush for the men who fight it, not heroism or mettle that makes them soldiers. He further reasons this: "It's the charge, the light brigade with only one man sailing neither with fear nor with regret into harm's way . . . that typically comes to mind 'first' in the classification of heroes" (258). There isn't a member of Alpha who "comes to mind 'first,'" and any adrenaline rush only seems to appear in a state of release after the action subsides. Heroes they are not, and they know and have reconciled this, emasculative as it may be. Similar to Horner, Tina Chen focuses on the soldier's feelings of displacement and separation, his difficulty in finding his home and place of comfort and reasons that "O'Brien's war stories, which are ultimately 'never about war,' reflect the difficult choices forced upon those who have confronted the contradictions of combat" (79). "Stockings" displays a yearning for home, and the romanticism of it is present and stems from the transposition and immense pressure that are inherent in war. Like the rest of Alpha Company, Henry Dobbins is thousands of miles away from home. What he carries is loneliness and a hope to return to what is familiar and comfortable, and the center of that is his girlfriend. Wearing female clothing as an emblem, Dobbins "liked putting his nose into the nylon and breathing in

the scent of his girlfriend's body; he liked the memories this inspired; he sometimes slept with the stocking up against his face, the way an infant sleeps with a flannel blanket, secure and peaceful" (O'Brien 111). The sexually transgressive emblem personifies what he is fighting for and what he is yearning to go home to and though it may go against the "time-honored masculine image of rugged independence that has flourished in American . . . popular culture" (Nye 1941) that puts emphasis toward what T. Walter Herbert argues, in his 2002 *Sexual Violence and American Manhood*, on "eliminating all traces of feminine selfhood or of childishness as well as any suspicion of 'sissified' behavior" (60), the smell of the hose makes her closer, and the texture of the nylon allows him to touch her. It gives Dobbins "access to a spiritual world, where things were soft and intimate, a place where he might someday take his girlfriend to live" (O'Brien 112). The clothing brings a sense of serenity and gentleness to a place without it; it evokes nostalgia and is symbolic of all that home represents and that Vietnam fails to provide.

War fiction doesn't usually concern itself with women (Smiley 603), but O'Brien's use of Mary Anne—a masculine female character—is another avenue that brings the men closer. David Jarraway concludes, "[Mary Anne] confirms [soldiers' and society's] sexist myths of the active and aggressive male and the passive and docile female . . ." (700). Mary Anne is the girlfriend of Mark Fossie, a medic who earlier in the war served with Rat Kiley. Because they are serving in a tame and quiet area of Vietnam and not seeing dangerous combat, Fossie bucks protocol, puts some money together, and sends for Mary Anne to come and stay with him—six weeks later, she arrives (O'Brien 89). At first, things are fine and normal; Fossie and Mary Anne are content, and besides being in a foreign country where a war is being fought, they are together and happy, but as a few weeks fall off the calendar, Mary Anne transforms, and "the narrator's descriptions [of her] change from conventionally feminine to more masculine terms" (Smith 36),

and she takes on the habits of the soldiers: “No cosmetics, no fingernail filing. She stopped wearing jewelry . . . Hygiene became a matter of small consequence. . . . Eddie Diamond taught her how to disassemble an M-16, how the various parts worked . . .” (O’Brien 94), and she begins showing more and more interest in the particulars of war, roaming “around the compound asking questions: What exactly was a trip flare? How did a Claymore work? What was behind those scary green mountains to the west?” (91). She transforms from the pretty, petite Fossie’s girlfriend to one of the guys. Smith says that the “deepest trauma in the book occur[s] when the masculine subject is threatened with dissolution and displacement” (18), and when Mary Anne is “portray[ed] as *more* masculine than the men, hence monstrous and unnatural” (32), the members of Alpha, particularly Fossie, are undermined, threatened, and intimidated: “Once or twice, gently, [Fossie] suggested that it might be time to think about heading home, but Mary Anne laughed and told him to forget it. ‘Everything I want . . . is right here’” (O’Brien 94), as she “seemed comfortable and entirely at home; the hostile atmosphere did not seem to register” (92). She abandons what set her apart—clothing, smell, appearance—and assimilates to the looks and actions that make her part of the soldiers’ world, part of the bush. Mary Anne is flown in to surround and comfort Fossie, but the irony is that she takes to war and all its intricacies, and this daunts and unnerves her boyfriend, and for that matter, others in the platoon. Mary Anne “is O’Brien’s argument that the kinder, gentler world of the feminine is nothing but an illusion” (Smiley 603). Fossie “seemed to collapse. He squatted down, rocking on his heels, still clutching the flashlight” (O’Brien 95). O’Brien and Fossie are part of the “kinder and gentler” world, and the connection between them—what draws the author to this young medic—stems from their inability and subsequent insecurity to acclimate to battle and the surroundings of it. This is only exacerbated when a young woman does what they cannot.

Mary Anne steadily begins to separate from Fossie and their domestic bliss as her transformation continues. Mary Anne “seems to [reverse] gender power relations, becoming more masculine than any other soldier in the text” (Vanderwees 200). She becomes the predator, and the men are the prey (200), further reducing her boyfriend and his brothers. As Fossie wakes up one morning, Mary Anne is nowhere to be found. Fossie and the men search for her, only to find that she has taken up with the Greenies (Green Berets), the best of the best, the most savage men around. They allow her inside their group, and she fits in (O’Brien 97) where many of the men—Fossie obviously being one of them—don’t, and while Mary Anne performing what they cannot is emasculating for them, it also is a conduit that allows Fossie to better face the reversal of gender roles in his relationship because the other men can relate to his shortcomings, and this brings a sense of understanding and subsequent comfort. She “wore a bush hat and filthy green fatigues; she carried the standard M-16 automatic rifle; her face was black with charcoal. Mary Anne handed [Fossie] the weapon. ‘I’m exhausted,’ she said. ‘We’ll talk later’” (98). She’s had a long day at work. She dismisses Fossie and his concerns, taking the authoritative role in the relationship and further rendering him powerless. He “tried hard to keep up a self-assured pose . . . but there was a fragility to it, something tentative and false. . . . If Mary Anne happened to move a few steps away from him, even briefly, he’d tighten up and force himself not to watch her. But then a moment later he’d be watching” (99). Gender roles are completely inverted. Metaphorically speaking, Fossie is now the “housewife” waiting on the “man” to get home from his day at work. Fossie’s search committee is relieved to find her alive, but they know Mary Anne’s boyfriend won’t appreciate all the details of their recovery: “Ambush. All night long, man, Mary Anne’s out on fuckin’ ambush” (97). She goes from innocent girlfriend to hanging out and fitting in with the roughnecks—she belongs with the Greenies. She adapts to her new

civilization and becomes who she really wants to be, who she really is, and this is what intimidates Fossie and the other men. Fossie “couldn’t function. The grief took him by the throat and squeezed and would not let go. ‘Lost,’ he kept whispering” (100). Mary Anne easily becomes what they cannot. She is not lost. Fossie is. She embraces the hell of Vietnam: “The ‘blindness’ that O’Brien refers to are the ones we wear when we assume that being born male predisposes one to an intrigue with war. Just as we recognize our preconceptions about ‘how gentle and peaceful [women] are’ as ‘crap,’ we must similarly reconsider our notions of men as inherently violent and war-driven” (Ross 48). She is what they only can aspire to be, what they naturally are not: a Greenie, a killer, and “she took greedy pleasure in night patrols. She was good at it; . . . There were times, apparently, when she took crazy, death-wish chances—things even the Greenies balked at” (O’Brien 109). She was born a girl and became a woman, but when placed in a situation where it behooves her to be different, her masculinity more than presents itself. Fossie has lost her. He brings her to Vietnam to soften what is hard, but all she does is make it more difficult for him in that what was once a piece of his past, a reminder of home, is now a wistful reminder of another thing taken from him by fighting in Vietnam. And while this isn’t directly affecting Fossie’s mates, it makes them wonder about the security of what they left behind in the States. Will it be there if they return? If it is still there, will it be the same as it was before? Alpha members face the insecurity of the unknown and being powerless to control it, which serve as emotional ties strengthening the relationship they have with each other.

Mary Anne’s dominance over Fossie and the others again presents itself when she is found by those looking for her. She says to the men, “You’re in a place . . . where you don’t belong. . . . Sometimes I want to *eat* this place. The whole country . . . I just want to swallow it and have it there inside me. . . . When I’m out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can

feel my blood moving, my skin and my fingernails, everything . . .” (106). Mary Anne doesn’t fit the stereotypical American female, similar to so many other soldiers who don’t fit the ideal American male, the ones who revel in war, fighting, and honor. She comes alive in a male-dominated space and chastises them for not fitting into it as she does: “There was no emotion in her stare, no sense of the person behind it. But the grotesque part . . . was her jewelry. At the girl’s throat was a necklace of human tongues. . . . like pieces of black leather, the tongues were threaded along a length of copper wire, one tongue overlapping the next, the tips curled upward as if caught in a final shrill syllable” (105-106). She is what they don’t have the internal makeup to be. She has put herself in a man’s game and has dominated, whereas her boyfriend and his mates have struggled to get off the bench.

In his 1904 *Adolescence*, Stanley Hall writes, “War is, in a sense, the acme of what some now call the manly protest. In peace women have invaded nearly all the occupations of man, but in war male virtues come to the fore, for women cannot go ‘over the top’” (102). Mary Anne does go over the top, and because the men of Alpha cannot, they are minimized: “As a consideration of the theoretical roots of heroism shows,” says McDonough, “the warrior’s status is etched round by fears: it is only a matter of which one to give in to, or *not* to give in to, as the case may be” (28). The men give in to their fears. Mary Anne does not. Vernon, in *Soldiers Once and Still*, declares that Fossie’s girlfriend “defies their expectations. They admire her, but they do not understand her. She remains a mystery . . . an entity men cannot tame, cannot reduce to their fantasies. They do not dismiss her; they respect the mystery that she has become” (250). The men admire her because she has what they don’t: an ability to “walk away and live her life free of social obligation because she does not need any society but her own. She becomes . . . everything Tim the narrator . . . and O’Brien the author never could become—someone who,

because she can walk away from other people, can walk away from the war” (250-251). She is the embodiment of O’Brien’s, Fossie’s, and many other members of Alpha’s insecurities in falling short of the model male figure. She “had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and a necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill” (O’Brien 110). Fossie, O’Brien, and others are not threatening. They are not “ready for the kill,” and this is another reason for their feelings of inadequacy and a source of their insecurities, both being what bring the observing men together in their nostalgia for things to go back to the way they were before and even during the conflict they are fighting.

Another emasculating homosocial bond is evident when O’Brien describes a man he killed. O’Brien’s congruence with Fossie and Dobbins is seen in this context in “The Man I Killed.” Like the previous two men, O’Brien is not a natural soldier, and when he kills an enemy combatant, he cannot deal with the repercussions. O’Brien describes the man in intricate detail, and these depictions show obvious correlations between the two. In ““The Things Men Do,”” Smith points out the characteristics of the man the author shot: a slim, almost dainty young man, with bony legs, narrow waist, and long shapely fingers (24-25). She discusses the dead man’s thin eyebrows and smooth skin and argues that “this feminization serves to express the man’s (the Vietnamese soldier’s) ill-suitedness for war . . .” (24-25). Smith’s description of the dead soldier shows more parallels between the shooter and the shot. The dead man’s features symbolize O’Brien’s feelings after causing his death. O’Brien knows this could have been he, with the Vietnamese soldier standing above him and observing his features. While performing the utmost function of a soldier—killing an enemy combatant—O’Brien can only focus on his features and how he might easily have been in his place. O’Brien not only connects to members

of his own platoon because of what they share in their soldierly duties, but because of the similarities he has with the enemy soldier, there is an observable tie to him as well. The author says the Vietnamese soldier's "eyebrows were thin and arched like a woman's . . . his clean black hair was swept upward . . . his forehead was lightly freckled, his fingernails were clean . . . his right cheek was smooth and hairless" (O'Brien 118). He mourns having killed the man and finds himself caught up in imagining what the innocent-looking enemy soldier's life had been. In fact, he sees himself in the young Vietnamese man he has shot: "[T]he young man would not have wanted to be a soldier, and in his heart would have feared performing badly in battle" (121). The killer and his target are one-in-the-same, and like O'Brien and many of his brothers of Alpha, they embody each other. Like O'Brien, "the man I killed would have listened to stories about the heroic Trung sisters and Tran Hung Dao's famous rout[s] . . . He would have been taught that to defend the land was man's highest duty and highest privilege" (119). Anderson says, "The idea of the ultimate sacrifice comes only with an idea of purity, through fatality. Dying for one's country, which usually one does not choose, assumes a moral grandeur . . ." (144). While this sounds prestigious and respectable, for this soldier and for O'Brien, it is of little consolation. Like O'Brien, he would have felt the patriarchal pressures to be a valiant soldier, and like the author, "the man I killed would have been determined to continue his education . . . and [attend] classes at the university . . . and avoid politics . . ." (O'Brien 122). But unlike the author, the man he killed didn't have that opportunity, and this haunts O'Brien. O'Brien tried to avoid killing, just like the dead man did; the two men are the same. The only difference is that O'Brien is the lucky one who can relay this story.

The author's actions after the killing, aside from the description of the dead Vietnamese soldier, continue to create bonds for him and the other members of Alpha. To survive and to be

able to return home, O'Brien and the rest of the servicemen have to kill or be killed, but the author cannot fathom what has happened and cannot reconcile what he has done to his enemy. Ross concludes that what O'Brien suggests these soldiers desire most is "to perform convincingly as men; it is the abiding fear of not being considered a man . . . that inflicts the most pain and suffering" (25). It is again perception versus reality. They are required to soldier but want nothing to do with its particulars. If it looks like a soldier, fights like a soldier, and acts like a soldier, then it is a soldier. They want nothing to do with soldiering; the men just want to be "considered men," to pass as manly. Being in the team photo is enough. They don't need to show up in any action shots. Chen again says that these "war stories are not about recovering from trauma or resolving the conflicts contributing to or created by the war in any permanent way; they are about accepting indeterminacy and learning to live not through Vietnam but with it" (80). Again, the dead Vietnamese soldier parallels O'Brien and the aforementioned Fossie and Dobbins, as they never wanted to be in the war—they just wanted to live—and are now looking for any way out of it. Fellow soldier, Kiowa, sees O'Brien struggling with what he has done and says, "Tim, it's a *war*. The guy wasn't Heidi—he had a weapon, right? It's a tough thing, for sure, but you got to cut out that staring. . . . Maybe you better lie down a minute. . . . Stop *staring*" (O'Brien 120, 122). Kiowa chastises O'Brien's softness, but there is a lot underneath his scolding. He is trying to empathize with O'Brien and knows he would react the same way if he took this man's life. The words directed at O'Brien are, essentially, directed at himself, as he knows it is imperative to keep his mind right to stay safe and alive. But, this exemplifies the alienation so many soldiers felt. The narrator has just killed a man. His reaction is normal and just, but because of O'Brien's mourning, he is seen as weak, and because Kiowa feels the same as O'Brien, it makes an already traumatic situation that much more difficult.

Farrell says that there is “inevitable guilt associated with war deaths and what soldiers do with that guilt . . . [as they try] to find a reason for the deaths they witness to make them less frightening, less random and meaningless” (3, 4), and O’Brien continues to feel sorrow and is mesmerized for what he has done. A basic tenant of being a soldier is having to squeeze the trigger and kill the enemy, but O’Brien can’t live with it. Kiowa tries to console him, but he is also attempting to console himself: “Listen to me,’ Kiowa said. ‘You feel terrible, I know that. . . . So listen, you best pull your shit together. Can’t just sit here all day. . . . Five minutes, Tim. Five more minutes and we’re moving out” (O’Brien 121, 123). The three men—one dead and the other two alive—mirror each other in this respect. The dead Vietnamese man was not savvy enough to stay alive, O’Brien cannot handle what he has done, and Kiowa cannot deal with what he may have to do. None of them is in his element; subsequently, all are ill-suited for war.

Cross and his platoon, “In the Field,” are trying to find Kiowa’s body and like O’Brien, Cross has no military ambitions. He is agonizing over the letter he will write to Kiowa’s dad and over his part in the young soldier’s death, but mostly, he is thinking of being anywhere but ‘Nam. Jarraway expands on this:

In the face of overwhelming madness, therefore, Tim O’Brien eradicates all possibility for responsive uplift in *The Things They Carried* by reducing even the metaphorical import of waste. As the measure of atrocious acts and imbecile events, waste’s claim on all concerned, accordingly, is seen to be absolutely literal. At this zero-degree level of rectitude, then, war becomes the equivalent of human waste—‘a goddamn *shit* field’ (*Things* 164)—in which an entire platoon must immerse itself in order to register most completely the nauseous vacuity and repulsive futility of their lives at war. (696)

For Cross and O'Brien, Vietnam is nothing but a waste. The political objectives. The lying politicians. The daily carries. Loved ones who don't understand or relate. The senseless deaths. It is all for nothing. Ross feels that "O'Brien and his characters seek liberation from what they perceive to be the stifling expectations of masculinity [and look to] the potential for escape from those nerve-wracking demands" (19). Cross fantasizes about New Jersey golf courses and life back home; O'Brien feels the same about Minnesota and a chance at a degree; their ache for home and their beliefs on the war are hindrances to their responsibilities and abilities in battle.

Lisa Ferguson says that like many soldiers, O'Brien and Cross have apprehension because of what many of the platoon are anxious of: an "American GI's overwhelming fear of emasculation. Unable to confidently solidify his manhood on the battlefield or his country's collective maleness in the larger world arena, . . . the combat soldier turned his [attention to other areas]" (2-3). Sigfried Sassoon once said that soldiers are dreamers. They turn to whatever they can to divert their attention from their current situation. Cross "did not want the responsibility of leading these men. He had never wanted it. . . . He was unprepared. Twenty-four years old and his heart wasn't in it. Military matters meant nothing to him. He did not care one way or the other about the war, and he had no desire to command . . ." (O'Brien 160-161). The same can be said of O'Brien, and it is why he feels such a kinship with Cross and a reason they both think of Kiowa, a man shot and killed, "a fine soldier and a fine human being, a devout Baptist, and there was no way Lieutenant Cross would allow such a good man to be lost under the slime of a shit field" (156), and Cross refuses to let any of his men go. As they look to retrieve Kiowa in order to properly send him home, and as Cross continues to flounder in his own guilt, still thinking of what he'll say to Kiowa's parents, he watches an unnamed soldier who was closest to Kiowa when he was shot: "In his hooded poncho, everything caked with mud, the boy's face was

impossible to make out. The filth seemed to erase identities, transform the men into identical copies of a single soldier, which was exactly how Jimmy Cross had been trained to treat them, as interchangeable units of a command” (156). The ‘caked mud’ symbolizes the identity and sameness of the war’s participants and what brings them together as one. Identity is blurred, as each man is essentially the same: he is scared; he wants to stay alive; he doesn’t want to be in battle; he wants to go home; he is his brother’s keeper. Cross sees that the “young soldier was trying hard not to cry. He, too, blamed himself. Bent forward at the waist, groping with both hands, he seemed to be chasing some creature just beyond reach, something elusive . . . the boy was explaining things to an absent judge. It wasn’t to defend himself. The boy recognized his own guilt and wanted only to lay out the full causes” (162-163). This scene is synonymous to Cross’s reaction after Lavender is shot and killed and connects the lieutenant to this young man and what he is going through. The men’s goal to keep each other safe is a badge of courage the soldiers are proud to wear, but these shared experiences, sadly, extend past the theaters of war. When a brother dies, they come together to carry him, to help him to his resting place. They come together to honor and to share grief; in *Soldiers Once and Still*, Vernon intimates that

war is as much about what war does to men as what men do in war. The soldier is *done to* by his own nation and military as well as by the enemy. To the degree that the military places the soldier in a position of extreme dependence on others, to the degree he perceives *being done to* as passivity and impotence, and to the degree that he associates dependence, *passivity*, and impotence as emasculation and feminization, the autonomously minded male finds himself in something of a bind. (206)

These soldiers have no control. The only power they experience is taking care of the man next to them, and when that goes awry, their “badges of courage,” ones already hanging on their uniforms by a thread, fall into the shit field that swallowed men like Kiowa.

Rat Kiley struggles in “Night Life” in a manner similar to Cross and O’Brien with their lack of desire for military duty. The pressures of the conflict are bending his mind and his bearings: “They’d sleep away the daylight hours . . . then at dusk they’d put on their gear and move out single file into the dark. . . . It was the purest black you could imagine . . . the kind of clock-topping black that God must’ve had in mind when he sat down to invent blackness. . . . So pretty soon you’d get jumpy. Your nerves would go” (O’Brien 209). Pulling night patrol is a special kind of danger; an already precarious existence becomes that much more dangerous and unnerving for the men. Soldiers like Kiley would “worry about getting cut off from the rest of the unit . . . and then the real panic would bang in . . . It made for some bad dreams” (209). This is another form of battle. Dodging bullets and land mines is tough enough, but the unknown and unseen during night patrol create a similar opponent that causes men like Kiley even more uncertainty. Bikos says that O’Brien’s goal “is to isolate that heroic ideal that many times forces men to suffer . . . for national agendas” (243), and while yes, there is suffering, Kiley is not able to internalize it—similar to Kiowa who scorned O’Brien when he couldn’t reconcile killing a man and thus lashed out to hide his own feelings—and keep it at bay because for him, “it was different. Too many body bags, maybe. Too much gore” (O’Brien 209). In “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” Mary Anne “demonstrates that identities are not fixed or containable” (Vanderwees 201), and this holds true for Kiley. After staying to himself, his inability to cope with war causes him to flip: “He couldn’t stop talking. Wacky talk, too. Talking about bugs . . . how the worst thing in Nam was the goddamn bugs. Big giant killer bugs . . . mutant bugs, bugs

with fucked-up DNA . . . chemically altered by napalm and defoliants and tear gas and DDT. He claimed the bugs were personally after his ass” (O’Brien 209). The pressure is too much for him; he is beginning to crack, and “late one afternoon, as the platoon prepared for another march, he broke down in front of Mitchell Sanders. Not crying, but up against it. He said he was scared. And it wasn’t normal scared. . . . Sometimes he’d stare at guys who were still okay, the alive guys, and he’d start to picture how they’d look dead. . . . It was ghoulish” (211). Protagonists from the novel, says McDonough, are “brought to the brink by the necessity of battle, the dilemmas posed by the warrior mentality” (23) and force themselves to be what they are not for the good of the Company but for men such as Kiley, and even guys like Kiowa lashing out so that they can cover their own true feelings, he cannot withstand the façade, and he takes a drastic measure to find an escape. There is no option to quit. His fear of Vietnam, his fear of death, and most importantly, his fear of letting down his fellow soldiers win, and his only way out, his only way to escape this hell, is the million-dollar injury: “He took off his boots and socks, laid out his medical kit, doped himself up, and put a round through his foot” (O’Brien 212). This is his (and for many, their) way to stay above the grass and ghoul that made up Vietnam.

Soldiering Together: Shared Burdens and Trials

The emasculated men of Alpha Company lose strength and struggle with their roles in the war, so a need to belong to a community that feels and shares in the same tribulations helps them better navigate their daily toils. O'Brien and other members of Alpha go through each other's difficulties and trials and share the burdens of soldiering together to be accepted and to feel a sense of belonging, because "a true war story is never about war. It's about sunlight [and] the special way that dawn spreads out on a river when you know you must cross the river and march into the mountains and do things you are afraid to do. It's about love and memory. It's about sorrow. It's about sisters who never write back and people who never listen" (81), and this need for camaraderie is evident in "How to Tell a True War Story," "Ambush," and "The Ghost Soldiers." These stories are metaphors of Alpha Company and their experiences, and the soldiers are linked through the telling of them. O'Brien details his bond with Rat Kiley and Mitchell Sanders in "How to Tell a True War Story." The story's context centers on the author articulating stories of Kiley and Sanders trading tales, and O'Brien wants to be a part of those narratives and that "community" because of the connection that results through the disclosure of these experiences. They are telling stories that civilians cannot replicate and won't be able to understand. Having shared these experiences make the men unique and more closely connected. The respect the men have for each other, the love that develops between them, is another example of homosocial subtext in the novel. An example is when one of O'Brien's buddies, Rat Kiley, loses his closest friend, Lemon, in the battalion. Kiley writes a personal letter to the dead man's sister to tell her what a great friend he was and what a wonderful brother she had: "Rat almost bawls writing it. He gets very teary telling about the good times they had together, how her brother made the war seem almost fun, always raising hell and lighting up villes and bringing

smoke to bear every which way” (64-65). As the letter comes to a close, it gets emotional and somber, detailing how much Kiley loved him, how they were like soul mates, or twins, and how they had so much in common (65). Rat lets his guard down; he shows his true identity and his love for Lemon, and after sharing the letter, “Rat Kiley was crying. He tried to say something, but then cradled his rifle and went off by himself” (76). The struggle is, though, that “Rat mails the letter. He waits two months. The dumb cooze never writes back” (65). Kiley pours his heart out. He wants Lemon’s family to know how much he was loved and respected, and he also wants to be heard. He wants someone to listen. All the men do, but this is a common theme when writing home to the States. Loved ones don’t understand, or similar to this case, messages fall on deaf ears, so talking to and disclosing with each other is the best the soldiers have.

Soldiers are part of a unique group, and war makes them share experiences that civilians cannot understand. These men come together because each can relate to what another is experiencing. People they reach out to back home cannot empathize, so they lean on each other for this particular need, creating life-long emotional ties between the men: “What shapes a person, then, is difficult to unravel. An individual seems to be the product of biological predisposition as well as a jumble of experiences: wartime experience as well as larger life experience. In any case, human essence and selfhood remain mysterious” (Farrell 20). War reformats these men. Their discomfort and frequent inability to navigate this new life cannot adequately be communicated to those they left behind, but communicating with other members of Alpha, those who can truly identify with them, releases them from situations they want to escape. Mitchell Sanders tells O’Brien about a rough hump—a risky and precarious mission. Like Cross, O’Brien, Kiley, and many others who serve in the Company, their messages sent home are lost in translation: “Late in the night Mitchell Sanders touched my shoulder. ‘Just came

to me,' he whispered. 'The moral, I mean. Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothin'. Like the fatass colonel. The politicians, all the civilian types. Your girlfriend. My girlfriend. . . . What they need is to go out on the LP. The vapors, man. Trees and rocks—you got to *listen* to your enemy" (O'Brien 73). They are able to support each other, to show weakness, to get the "heavy" off their chests, to lessen the alienation they feel when they deal with those back home who don't understand them or their experiences. These are stories that only they can understand, and these conversations unite them and bring them closer together, helping ease them through the struggles they face in Nam.

The war is monotonous, but at the same time, the soldiers cannot be lulled to sleep because each step presents danger, so the daily humps and stresses weigh on the members of Alpha Company:

Shoved or hit in his childhood school yard, any man of Alpha Company would fight. Rather than lose dignity or the appearance of courage, he would scream and snarl and flail the air and flail his enemies in the cruel power and glory of male potency. . . . The collective male honor code precludes the contemplation of fear. Admitting fear is simply illegal or shameful in the male universe. The men of Alpha Company were nurtured in the same laws of masculinity as any other soldier in any other war. A man must not cry. He must not whine or complain. Worse, he must not lose control over his emotions or run in the heat of crisis. He must at least wear the mask of bravery in all conflict. The burden of fear and shame that he would have to suffer if he let it creep into his face haunted even the toughest soldier of Alpha Company. . . . Certainly, under the crushing weight of stress, violence, and ordnance, the male role 'was the heaviest burden of all, for it could never be put down.' (Horner 260-261)

Daily wartime soldiering is taxing, both physically and mentally, and patrolling the mountains and jungles of Vietnam takes a toll, but talking about their experiences, doling out their fears, and describing their insecurities help each of them cope. Sanders describes a day in the life: “[G]uys lie down and wait and that’s all they do, nothing else, they lie there for seven straight days and just listen. And man, I’ll tell you—it’s spooky” (O’Brien 69). This description “repeatedly underscores the incommunicability of war. . . . the communication of the traumatic experience” (Smith 18) that the men are familiar with. There is a lot of down time, exorbitantly long stretches to overthink and dwell on their circumstances, so they need each other to free their minds. Sanders continues, “This is mountains. You don’t *know* spooky till you been there. . . . everything’s all wet and swirly and tangled up, and you can’t see jack, you can’t find your own pecker to piss with. . . . Serious spooky. You just go with the vapors—the fog sort of takes you in . . . And the sounds, man. The sounds carry forever. You hear stuff nobody should ever hear” (O’Brien 69). This is a scene only a war veteran can understand. Letters home can’t explain this. Correspondence received from loved ones can’t ease the stress, as sympathy pales in comparison to empathy, an empathy that can only be found through their squad mates: “Sanders made a sound in his throat, like a sigh, as if to say he didn’t care if I believed [his portrayal] or not. But he did care. He wanted me to feel the truth, to believe by the raw force of feeling. He seemed sad, in a way” (70). Like for many Vietnam soldiers, the conditions can crack a man, and this chink in masculinity holds true for Sanders, and a way to hold on, a means for him to keep it together, is to share with his brothers, with those he parallels.

They look for emancipation from the duties and stresses of their setting. The aforementioned Lemon releases his tension and lightens the mood not only for himself but also for his mates within the battalion: “On Halloween, this real hot spooky night, the dude paints up

his body all different colors and puts on this weird mask and hikes all over to a ville and goes trick-or-treating almost stark naked, just boots and balls and an M-16” (65). This transgressive act is brash and masculine, crazy and spontaneous—all things celebrated in males. He is exemplifying these macho societal standards of the ideal soldier, and he is also shedding stress and trying to lighten the mood for himself and those he troops with; it is somewhat like a charge of the batteries for the soldiers to continue their duties in the war. But these reprieves also come with risk. O’Brien says, “They were kids; they just didn’t know. A nature hike, they thought, not even a war, so they went off into the shade of some giant trees—quadruple canopy, no sunlight at all—and they were giggling and calling each other yellow mother and playing a silly game they’d invented” (66). The relaxation and avoidance they share alleviate the tension and heaviness they live with. The jokes and games allow each man to see a different side of one another and create a positive relational dynamic that bring the group stronger camaraderie and a much needed reprieve; however, these reduce their attention to detail and because “almost all of the literature on the war . . . makes clear that the only certain thing during the Vietnam War was that nothing was certain” (Timmerman 111), the effects of this brief escape are perilous:

They were just goofing. There was a noise, I suppose, which must have been the detonator . . . Lemon step[ped] from the shade into bright light. His face was suddenly brown and shining. A handsome kid . . . and when he died it was almost beautiful, the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree full of moss and vines and white blossoms. (O’Brien 67).

This is an unfortunate example of the negatives associated with wanting to be a part of the group. Some of these men will do anything to receive adoration and acceptance and act rashly and carelessly. An innocent reprieve can end tragically.

In “The Ghost Soldiers,” O’Brien recalls his time at a hospital after getting shot in a firefight. The story’s conflict centers on an inexperienced medic, Bobby Jorgensen, and his bungled handling of O’Brien’s wound. Jorgensen “was no Rat Kiley. He was green and incompetent and scared” (181). This wound takes him out of action and away from his unit. It should have been the dream scenario, one that signed his papers to head home. He is shot in the butt and is removed from battle: a soldier’s dream. Ironically, though, O’Brien

missed the adventure, even the danger, of the real war out in the boonies. It’s a hard thing to explain to somebody who hasn’t felt it, but the presence of death and danger has a way of bringing you fully awake. It makes things vivid. When you’re afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before . . . You make close friends. You become part of a tribe . . . and share the same blood—you give it together, you take it together. (183)

He doesn’t miss the battle; he misses his men, his friends, and the bonds formed through the experience the Vietnam War created. He is intoxicated by the feeling of this camaraderie, and without it, he feels lost and inadequate. Being removed from the bush, from the fight, he’s no longer one of the guys, and this, for O’Brien, parallels death. Of course he wants to be home, away from the war and safe, but his guys are still out there risking life and limb without him, and he is no longer part of *them*. Alex Vernon, in *Soldiers Once and Still*, notes that the soldier in war “undergoes rituals of passage, rites of separation, which remove the individual or group of individuals from his or their accustomed place; liminal rites, which symbolically fix the character of the ‘passenger’ as one who is in between states, places or conditions; and finally rites of incorporation . . . which welcome the individual back into the . . . group” (229). O’Brien wants nothing more than to flee his rite of separation and to move into the rite of incorporation. He

would rather be in harm's way than away from his teammates. The shared bonds those friendships have created pull much harder than being safe, clean, and secluded. O'Brien concludes, "In a way, I envied . . . all of them. Their deep bush tans, the sores and blisters, the stories, the in-it-togetherness. I felt close to them, yes, but I also felt a new sense of separation" (184). In fact, Lorrie Smith finds it "important to note that the moments of deepest trauma in the book occur when the masculine subject is threatened with dissolution or displacement" (18), but on a chance encounter, Alpha spends a few days at this compound where O'Brien is recovering, and O'Brien now realizes that because of this wound, he is no longer a part of the group, this community: "They were still my buddies, at least on one level, but once you leave the boonies, the whole comrade business gets turned around. You become a civilian. You forfeit membership in the family, the blood fraternity, and no matter how hard you try, you can't pretend to be a part of it" (O'Brien 185). O'Brien would trade his safety and peace of mind, his warm bed and clean clothes, his close proximity to pretty nurses and leisure, just to be back in the mix with his fellow soldiers. These shared bonds trump all.

Like the other members of Alpha, an escape from Vietnam is the ultimate goal, but for O'Brien, the separation from his group, his community, is a somber realization. Jarraway thinks that "within a psychoanalytic revisionism . . . is the need to give some credence [for a man] . . . to be the object of another man's desire" (703), and this is what O'Brien lacks as he is removed from Alpha. He is out of sight and out of mind. He is forgotten, as the men have moved on. The author still holds resentment over how Jorgenson handled his injury, how he has caused him to be removed from his guys and his role, but the medic has improved, and he has won over the other members of the Company, and now for O'Brien, his pain has grown exponentially: he is no longer part of the crew, and his crew not only has moved on, but it has replaced him with the

man the author blames for his removal. O'Brien has been "dumped" and replaced by another man whom the men desire. Mitchell Sanders says, "Thing is, he's doing a lot better now. I mean, listen, the guy knows his shit. . . . People change. Situations change. I hate to say this, man, but you're out of touch. Jorgenson—he's *with* us now" (O'Brien 188). But O'Brien isn't. Not only do the men not share his hatred for Jorgenson, but they embrace him, and this only adds to O'Brien's sense of abandonment and emasculation. O'Brien "felt something shift inside [him]. It was anger, partly, but it was also a sense of pure and total loss. I didn't fit anymore. They were soldiers, I wasn't. In a few days they'd saddle up and head back into the bush, and I'd stand up on the helipad to watch them march away . . . A funny thing, but I felt betrayed" (188). Weirdly, they don't have anything in common. O'Brien is safe and secure in a hospital, and the men are heading back out into the bush. One is out of it—literally—while the others are back in the middle of it. What they once shared is gone, and with that, so is their relationship and connection. O'Brien feels robbed of the only thing getting him through Vietnam. Jarraway's continued argument in "Excremental Assault" is that for the men, the war is nothing but a waste and because of this, a recovery of their true selves is paramount in order to regain what they had before battle; this theme of romantic nostalgia accompanies Smith's study and illuminates O'Brien's need to belong:

[W]hat is perhaps more insupportable for the narrator than his weeks of agonizing pain recuperating in a foreign hospital is his enforced removal from a community of men whose fierce loyalty and compassion for each other the shock of war is able to authenticate in any number of passionately charged ways—homosocial possibilities somewhat ironically belied by the narrator's vengeful intention merely to 'think straight.' (702)

The positives from male-bonding are obvious, and so are the negatives when those relationships are ripped away. The bonds the men share allow them to be their true selves, to be comfortable in uncomfortable situations, to have a reason to soldier and fight not only for country but for kin, but once those associations disappear, the detachment and isolation created from trying to meet the ideals of the acceptable soldier and masculine American male reappear, and now he has to face those expectations alone. Chen remarked, “The narrator’s sense of alienation and exile stems from his separation from his platoon. The platoon . . . is a body from which the narrator is metaphorically amputated” (93). What is worse for O’Brien than being in the hospital is being removed from his “community of men whose fierce loyalty and compassion for each other” (Jarraway 702) cannot be replaced. He is radically detached from his life back in the States, and now that he is in a hospital and not in the thick of it with his Company, he is unable to fit in either community.

O’Brien desperately seeks to regain his masculinity and also his lost connection to Alpha Company. He wants to feel like a soldier again, to be back in the group. To matter. Chen says that “[e]xile . . . figured as alienation from members of one’s community, both family and friends” (82) and to regain what he lost because of his injury, he devises a plot to get back at Jorgenson. Bonds are stronger than oak, as O’Brien seeks out Azar for help to get back into his old life. O’Brien does not like or respect Azar, but because of their shared soldiering and what experiences come with that, they can still bond, as they come together to get back at the medic: “We [O’Brien and Azar] went over to my hooch, picked up our gear, and then moved through the night down to the wire. I felt like a soldier again. Back in the bush, it seemed. . . . Old times, I thought. A kind of thrill, a kind of dread” (O’Brien 196). This mission serves two purposes: in a shallow sense, it allows him to avenge Jorgenson’s mishandling of his wound; but more

importantly, he feels relevant again. He feels like a soldier, not a gimp. He is in control and feels as if he has power, something missing while he lies in a hospital bed in a calm, controlled setting. O'Brien wants the young medic to feel what he did after he was shot and waited for care. He exclaims, "You slip out of your own skin, like molting, shedding your own history and your own future, leaving behind everything you ever were or wanted or believed in. You know you're about to die. . . . and all you can do is whimper and wait. This, now, was something we shared" (201). O'Brien is again a combatant, a participant in the war, and he is exacting revenge. He is soldiering, but this act is not what he thought it would be. He is getting payback, but it is not providing him happiness. Azar, his partner in crime, says, "This here's what you wanted . . . You dig playing war, right? That's all this *is*. A cute little backyard war game. Brings back memories, I bet—those happy soldiering days. Except now you're a has-been. One of those American Legion types . . . Pitiful. . . . Purely pitiful" (202). O'Brien is again falling short of the idyllic soldier, failing to be the strong, aggressive, macho soldier he is expected to be, as the "fiasco leaves O'Brien feeling emasculated and impotent, [and] like most feelings about the war, it was not heroic or uplifting" (Bikos 246). Azar continues, "Man, I'll tell you something. You're a sorry, sorry case. . . . Disgusting. . . . Sorriest fuckin' specimen I ever seen. . . . Sad" (O'Brien 206). But this isn't enough to deter the author. He's not cut out to continue with the act. O'Brien thinks, "[I] hated [Jorgensen] for making me stop hating him. . . . Again, I felt that closeness. Almost war buddies" (190, 207). O'Brien's revengeful ploy is foiled due to his feelings for Jorgensen and a lack thereof for Azar. O'Brien's plot is not "heroic or uplifting," to steal from Bikos, because as he is trying to get back at the medic, he realizes Jorgensen is a good man who made a rookie mistake and that Azar is just a simple grunt whom he would never associate with if both were not soldiers in the same platoon. Jorgensen's reaction to the author's plot endears

him to O'Brien, which is a positive because it brings the two men together, but conversely, it again takes O'Brien out of soldiering and Alpha Company.

In "Ambush," O'Brien continues to grapple with his part in a Vietnamese soldier's death and pretends to tell his daughter about the man he killed. Being heard, even by his daughter, brings him closer to this man and also to Kiowa, who tries to console him after O'Brien kills the enemy combatant. Telling the story not only cements his bond to Kiowa but also allows him to reconcile his actions. O'Brien's guilt is palpable, as he seems to try and wish the memory away: "It was entirely automatic. I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty. I crouched and kept my head low. . . . I was terrified. There were no thoughts about killing. The grenade was to make him go away—just evaporate" (126-127). The writer unabashedly admits to his martial shortcomings: he cannot resolve the horrors this man's death has caused him. The basic tenant of being a soldier at war is to kill or be killed, but O'Brien still battles with what he has done. He recalls, "Kiowa tried to tell me that the man would've died anyway. He told me it was a good kill, that I was a soldier and this was a war, that I should shape up and stop staring and ask myself what the dead man would've done if things were reversed" (127). Everything he does in Vietnam is forced and foreign and against his true nature, but Kiowa's assurance eases his guilt and keeps the author's head level enough to continue with his duties. O'Brien admits "he sold himself out to the masculine responsibility of being a soldier despite his adamant feelings against the war. However, these social constraints exist even during his time in Vietnam deciding the outcome of many [of his] situations . . ." (Bikos 244), and this is also echoed by Ross: "The demands of masculinity, the rote memory of how to act like a man, especially amidst the trauma of war, deny imagination its voice, which interferes with the emotional, if not physical, survival

of the men” (41). When a man wears the title of “soldier,” O’Brien and others of Alpha prove that the label does not necessarily change who they are but because they aren’t alone with this feeling, that they can look at other men in their battalion and realize they, too, are struggling and going through what they are, the spotlight on their shortcomings is not so bright. O’Brien’s kill was because he had to, because it was expected of him, but he was worse for the wear, as he states, “Even now, I haven’t finished sorting it out. Sometimes I forgive myself, other times I don’t. In the ordinary hours of life I try not to dwell on it, but now and then . . . I’ll look up and see the young man step out of the morning fog. . . . and he’ll pass within a few yards of me and suddenly smile at some secret thought and then continue up the trail to where it bends back into the fog” (O’Brien 128). The American and the Vietnamese soldier are synonymous. O’Brien sees himself in the man he killed. The book’s author knows it just as easily could have been him and wishes with everything he has that the dead man could get up and walk back into the fog from which he emerged and go back to his life. It would unmistakably be best for both of them.

The Acclimating Veteran

Shared soldiering and the accompanied burdens create ties for men in Vietnam, and these bonds also factor strongly in the successful acclimation for the young men of Alpha platoon. The transition from soldier to civilian highlights the difficulty for the men to acclimate after the war. Many of the men feel inadequate and search for a place and for peace in a society that has drastically changed since they left it. O'Brien connects to Norm Bowker and Cross in "Notes," "Speaking of Courage," "Spin," and "Field Trip." O'Brien's life involves much of what Bowker's does, and while he has these parallel experiences, he is more successfully able to do what Bowker and Cross cannot: move on. This, though, comes with guilt for the author, as seen in "Notes." For O'Brien, his way of staying in Bowker's and Cross's lives—to remain in this community—is to be their mouthpiece and to write about their lives. Bowker says to O'Brien in a letter, "What you should do, Tim, is write a story about a guy who feels like he got zapped over in that shithole. A guy who can't get his act together and just drives around town all day and can't think of any damn place to go and doesn't know how to get there anyway" (151). Bowker doesn't fit in, like many returning soldiers don't. Time didn't stand still for them; people have moved on, started new lives and new relationships, and the Bowkers and Crosses come home to unrecognizable places where they felt they would find situations of comfort. In *Soldiers Once and Still*, Vernon says that many soldiers, ones such as Bowker, "[want] to recover a self not defined by the war. [Bowker] wants to deny the war's effects on him—perhaps deny his mortality, his moral accountability . . . Trauma threatens the integrity of the self; the trauma survivor must therefore narratively reconstruct his sense of self—though this process never ends" (180, 199). Bowker is struggling to know what he is and who he is, compared to what he should be. Bowker looks to O'Brien, as he can identify with his struggles. O'Brien has been through

what he has, and even though the writer is not sharing the same difficulties after returning from the war, talking to him allows Bowker to have a *real* conversation, one where he can feel more of an understanding because his conversation partner can truly empathize with him because he also went through these unique experiences. Bowker's identity has changed, and he is struggling to find his old one, even a new one, as his "tone jump[ed] from self-pity to anger to irony to guilt to a kind of feigned indifference. He didn't know what to feel" (O'Brien 150). Many returning soldiers don't, but discussions and continued bonding with their peers help some transition from the war and back to their true selves: the ones they left behind before the war and the ones created by it, but this is a difficult task. Tina Chen quotes Salman Rushdie's concept of "homeland": "If we do look back, we must . . . do so in the knowledge—which gives rise to profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation . . . almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the things that were lost" (80-81). And this is the issue. Bowker is looking for something certain in order to get his legs back underneath him. His hometown and its familiarities should do this for him, but they don't, as his war experience has changed him enough that what he returns to is just as uncomfortable and foreign as Vietnam was. His sense of alienation proves this: "Hard to describe. That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him . . . Feels like I'm still in deep shit" (O'Brien 150).

Conversations with their peers help when the soldiers return home, but sometimes the damage is too severe from which to recover. This "look back" into what was before the war, this remembering how things once were, creates a situation for soldiers like Bowker to suffer "from an overwhelming and compelling fear of exile, which is verbalized as a break with the familiar" (Chen 82). Like many returnees, Bowker doesn't fit into his new world, and this severe alienation is hard to overcome. His homecoming should contain great amounts of grandeur,

spoils fit for a king, but all he finds is further displacement. Bowker struggles, and in this letter to O'Brien, he continues, "There's no place to go. Not just in this lousy little town. In general. My life . . . It's almost like I got killed over in Nam . . . ' He didn't know what to feel" (O'Brien 150). There is a difficulty to pick up and continue what was, and these conversations are a way for men like Bowker to stay above the "shit field" that claimed men like Kiowa. Those they left are different, and so are their situations, and the war and its effects have forever altered Bowker. Vernon discusses this in *Soldiers Once and Still*: "The [collection of the stories'] recursive form signifies its status not as a war story at all but as a postwar story of a veteran struggling with his demons" (225). Bowker struggled in the war. While there, he toiled with patriarchal pressures—seemingly self-imposed—trying to fight with courage and valor, hopefully winning a medal to bring home to his dad to gain his favor and to make him proud, but he was not able to do so. He cannot shake this feeling of inadequacy as he fights to move on after returning home. The author can feel his friend's desperation through the words of the letter, and he resolves to make a visit to Bowker's home town (O'Brien 152). O'Brien visits him in Iowa, and Bowker narrates his biggest regret—not being able to save his friend, Kiowa. O'Brien says, "He wished he could've explained some of this. How he had been braver than he ever thought possible . . . [but] the truth . . . is I let him go" (147). Not being able to hang on, not being able to save his brother, haunts him, and in August of 1978, he hanged himself (154). It is something so many of his comrades grapple with when returning from war. Men like Cross, men like Bowker, men like O'Brien, when they return to the States, "[r]ecovering from trauma . . . can only proceed . . . by way of a restructuring of personal experiences . . . [but] in contrast . . . by falling back upon the already known and familiar, [it] will negate the reality of trauma by failing to include in personal experience what has been formerly left unthought" (Jarraway 699). But when they come home to

find that the familiar is anything but, trauma is not negated. Ironically, the men leave Vietnam only to come home facing an even more formidable opponent. Even though Bowker's integration back to civilian life was not successful, his conversations with O'Brien were the only ones that made sense, the ones that contained the substance to help him sort out his demons.

O'Brien looks for a final act of understanding upon returning from the war, and even though he adapts better than Cross and Bowker do, he takes his daughter, in "Field Trip," to the shit field where Kiowa died; he is attempting to do what Cross, and especially Bowker, were not able to do: find understanding, forgiveness, "or whatever else the land might offer. . . . After that long night in the rain, I'd seemed to grow cold inside . . . all the ambitions and hopes for myself sucked away into the mud" (O'Brien 173, 176). This connects to who they truly are and what they wish they really were. And years after the war, O'Brien visits Vietnam, its geography, and the ghosts—his former boyhood squadmates—that still live deep within him twenty years later: "Over the years, that coldness had never quite entirely disappeared. There were times in my life when I couldn't feel much, not sadness or pity or passion . . . and I blamed it for taking away the person I had once been" (176). O'Brien served as the sounding board and was the voice for Bowker and Cross after the war, and he now looks to Vietnam and its spirits to be his. Vernon remarks in *Soldiers Once and Still* that O'Brien's novel "never reaches resolution but truly represents the site of this . . . man's struggle to define himself in the social world while serving as a soldier fighting a war in which he did not believe. In the end, O'Brien refuses to identify with either the social community for which he went to war or the military units in which he trained and fought" (207). Ideally, a soldier would believe in the cause for which he was fighting and trust in the institution he was battling for, but for him and many others, this was not the case and is a substantial reason he finds himself back in Vietnam struggling for closure. Talking to the

land and remembering times with his old mates and the conversations and missions they shared help him reconcile this intense and unique experience: “[W]riting the autobiography has been an exercise in self-discovery and self-definition—a reconnaissance patrol of the self” (McInerney 197).

Vernon considers that O’Brien’s belief in these “manly” ideals cannot be found: “[T]he more O’Brien has gone back, the more he has realized the futility of finding redemptive dignity or moral grounding. He can’t save himself, or Kiowa . . . The actual site of his journey, the war in Vietnam, holds no solid moral framework, religious or political, upon which he can hang his individual value system” (*Soldiers* 239). He scuffles to get over something he cannot find answers to. Why was he there? What were they fighting for? Why did tens of thousands die for this? The frustration from it all is seen in the conversation he has in Saigon with his daughter. She asks a very simple question as to what the whole war was about (O’Brien 175). She wonders, “[W]hy was everybody so mad at everybody else?” and “What did you want?” (175). All he can muster is “[t]hey weren’t mad, exactly. Some people wanted one thing, other people wanted another thing” (175) and to what he wanted, he says, “Nothing . . . To stay alive” (175). He got his wish, but these simple responses to his daughter’s questions carry a lot of weight that he has been struggling for decades to carry. What O’Brien has been lugging since coming home from Vietnam, all the uncertainty and unanswered questions, the value and worth of what he and his brothers went through, weigh heavily and stunt his acclimation, one that—as with Cross and Bowker—one that never fully happens. O’Brien says, “Twenty years. A lot like yesterday, a lot like never. In a way, maybe, I’d gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I’d mostly worked my way out” (178) and because Vietnam “is ‘a mystery of events’ whose history is interior and not available to scientific historiography” (McInerney 190), O’Brien’s reconciliation

comes from writing his Vietnam history. There are the traditional face-to-face conversations he had with Cross and Bowker, and those helped the men—even Bowker—acclimate in and out of the war, but O’Brien’s stories are a cathartic way for the author to figure out his participation in the war. His pen was his muse, a set of ear drums in which to climb out of the shit field and regain what he had before the war took it all away.

In “Spin,” O’Brien does just that: he tries to put a positive slant on his tales as he aims to remember the happy times with some of the guys, but it’s not always an easy task. Even through his “spin,” the trouble the guys face upon return—and often in the war theatre—cannot stay out of his recollections. Their environment is paradoxical. They get used to the topography and adjust to the dangers, and after a time, a sense of familiarity and comfort is present, but this sense of adjustment is fleeting. O’Brien remembers,

If you weren’t humping, you were waiting. I remember the monotony. Digging foxholes. Slapping mosquitoes. The sun and the heat and the endless paddies. . . . you could die any number of ways . . . You’d try to relax. You’d uncurl your fists and let your thoughts go. Well, you’d think, this isn’t so bad. And right then you’d hear gunfire behind you and your nuts would fly up into your throat and you’d be squealing pig squeals. (32, 33).

Security and relative contentment quickly turn to collective distress and paranoia “and as a consequence, things often took on a curious, playful atmosphere . . . The competition could be lethal, yet there was a childlike exuberance to it all, lots of pranks and horseplay. Like when Azar blew away Ted Lavender’s puppy. ‘What’s everybody so upset about?’ Azar said. ‘I mean, Christ, I’m just a boy’” (35). They were innocent and mostly ill-equipped to handle their

situations. O'Brien remembers how young they all were, boys sent to settle issues created by men they will never know.

Chen says that for O'Brien and other returning veterans' "paradoxical desires—a yearning to reverse the unwilling transformations conjured by combat experience; the inexplicable sense of exile that troubles any possibility of an easy return or rest—are best expressed by how a true war story 'never seems to end' but can only be told and retold, different each time yet no less faithful to the truths it must convey" (77). These verbal revisits help the men heal and recover, whether the acclimation is relatively successful, like it was for Cross and the author, or even in the case of Bowker, if it wasn't. He remembers Bowker struggling to find a sense of calm and a way to please his father: "I'll tell you something, O'Brien. If I could have one wish, anything, I'd wish for my dad to write me a letter and say it is okay if I don't win any medals. That's all my old man talks about, nothing else. How he can't wait to see my goddamn medals" (O'Brien 34). This chat between the two men helps Bowker relieve stress and patriarchal pressure but foreshadows his struggles once he returns home to Iowa. Just as O'Brien faces difficulties after the war, Bowker's desires to fit back in and find meaning are coming up short. Through their conversations and letters, O'Brien relates to Bowker in his struggle to move on with the new and with his inability to forget the past. In Vernon's "Submission and Resistance," he says that the military "represents separation from home and family and, for young men, a level of achieved manhood, but military service also demands submission to the larger national home and traditional community values" (165) and for Bowker, the stress to live up to these pressures, particularly patriarchal, adds to his sense of personal exile. Both O'Brien and Bowker felt pressure from important male figures not only at home but in their communities and for the author, even Elroy was a man he wanted to please, so their need to pacify those

demands was a unifying bond. Staying safe and alive are intense burdens, but add onto that a burning tension to please these male figures, to not only return home unscathed but to also be adorned with congratulatory decorations, and it was easy for men like Bowker to succumb to that weight.

In “Speaking of Courage,” Bowker aimlessly drives around the lake of his hometown. It is arguable that “[a]t the very least, the impersonal level on which the way war was conducted left the American soldiery in Vietnam isolated from the culture, and society of the country and alienated from its people” (Jones 312). Norman is struggling in the aftermath of war and is trying to assimilate back into the society he left behind. He jumps in his truck and drives—he has nowhere to go and nothing meaningful to do. Timmerman says his “aimless circling [driving around the lake of his hometown] works then to demonstrate Norman Bowker’s inability to settle back into the routine of the World and exemplifies the psychological distance between his former and present selves” (108). His drive is symbolic of his mind. Thoughts circle continuously. There is no connection between points, no closure or loose ends tied. And one day on his drive, after his twelfth revolution around the water, he sees a former girlfriend, but he doesn’t know what to do or what to say: “On his third day home he’d seen her out mowing the lawn, still pretty in a lacy red blouse and white shorts. For a moment he’d almost pulled over, just to talk, but instead he’d pushed down hard on the gas pedal. She looked happy. She had her house and her new husband, and there was nothing he could say to her” (O’Brien 133). It is difficult to pick up and continue what was, so what will he say? What can he talk about? He cannot relate to her new life, and he is sure she won’t be able to relate to his. Bowker feels disconnected to everyone except men like O’Brien who have fought and walked his walk, but O’Brien isn’t there to help. He and other members of the platoon are gone and trying to live their lives and pick up what was

left before they deployed to Vietnam; unfortunately, Bowker is unable to do what they are doing. Sally “represents things lost, the way things might have been, and also, perhaps, a measure of [Bowker’s] internal change. So too Norman measures the town by the huge psychological distance he has grown from it” (Timmerman 107). Those they left are as foreign as the men they fought in Vietnam, and because of the war and their experiences in it, so are they and their situations, and these effects have forever altered men like Bowker. As O’Brien visits him, Bowker explains what haunts him the most, what causes him the most guilt: “He wished he could’ve explained some of this. How he had been braver than he ever thought possible . . . [but] the truth . . . is I let him go” (O’Brien 147). Not being able to hang on, not being able to save Kiowa, and now being unable able to talk or commiserate with anyone besides his old war buddies perpetually plagues him. It is something so many of his comrades grapple with when returning from battle. Their sense of pride and feeling of accomplishment for making it home heroes after defending their country is undermined by regrets of falling short in their duty.

Ironically, men like Cross, men like Bowker, and men like O’Brien return to the States and discover they have a new battle to fight. Jarraway’s “‘Excremental Assault’” links to Chen’s piece in its focus on a soldier’s sense of alienation. Jarraway states that “Bowker’s car circling the lake thus becomes a powerful metaphor not only for revolving the excremental trauma of war in its suggestive displacement onto the equally punishing domestic contexts of family and community back home—‘a nucleus’ around which O’Brien, in . . . ‘Notes’ . . . would suggest his entire novel turns” (705). Bowker doesn’t stop to talk to Sally because he feels what he brought home from war—what he has to offer—is of no value. What he does think is that his value is only relevant to the other members of Alpha, the men he will forever link to, but not to Sally or his parents or anyone in his hometown to whom he cannot relate. Bowker’s mind is racing:

“What he should do, he thought, is stop . . . and impress her with this new time-telling trick of his. . . . ‘Well, better hit the road, it’s five thirty-four,’ and she’d glance at her wristwatch and say, ‘Hey! How’d you *do* that?’ . . . He’d keep it light. He wouldn’t say anything about anything. . . . and he would not say a word about how he’d almost won the Silver Star for valor” (O’Brien 134). Almost. Just like he almost saved Kiowa. For Bowker, *almost* isn’t good enough, and the word connotes his feelings of inadequacy.

A motif surrounding Bowker within various other stories is his need—similar to other men’s needs in the platoon—to earn the admiration of his father. It was never good enough to just make it home from the war: throughout his days in the jungle, he felt the pressure to earn medals. Bowker could have “listed the seven medals he did win: the Combat Infantryman’s Badge, the Air Medal, the Army Commendation Medal, the Good Conduct Medal, the Vietnam Campaign Medal, the Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart . . . that was worth something, wasn’t it?” (135). To Bowker, these are participation medals, just acknowledgement that he fought, just a reward for being there. Everyone received them. His focus is on what he didn’t win and why. It is not about what he accomplished; he imagines this conversation with his father, in a sense told and discussed with O’Brien, because for Bowker, it is about “the medal he did not win and why he did not win it. ‘I almost won the Silver Star,’ he would have said” (135). His father, like many he encounters upon his return, cannot understand his hurt and is unable to console him or to help him communicate and reconcile what he feels are his shortcomings: “From that of Norman Bowker, the world to which he has returned is deaf to his war experience” (Timmerman 110). Bowker imagines telling his father about Kiowa—similar to how he discussed with O’Brien to help cope with his guilt and feelings of failure—and why he was unable to save him, about if he did, he would have that Silver Star, but “[s]ometimes, like that night in the shit field, the

difference between courage and cowardice was something small and stupid. . . . ‘I didn’t flip out . . . I was cool. If things had gone right, if it hadn’t been for that smell, I could have won the Silver Star’” (141, 143). Bowker was able to talk with O’Brien, but he can’t tell this to his father because he can’t, in his mind, let him down again. He is alone with these thoughts and his guilt: he let down Kiowa and his family, and he let down his father for not coming home with the highest honor. In “Reflections on Exile,” Edward Said describes this ostracism as “the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its future home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted” (357). Bowker deems his time in Vietnam as a failure. He was unable to perform valiantly in battle, and he can’t shake this uncertainty back home in Iowa, feeling impotent because he wasn’t capable of doing his job to ultimately make his father proud, as he lacked a key decoration on the uniform he wore home. Bowker was able to confide his regrets and discuss his hopes with O’Brien, and it kept him going; O’Brien helped him move forward, hoping that he could flourish once again, but he can’t with Sally, and he can’t with his dad, so being without the bonds found within Alpha, Bowker loses himself in his own shit field.

Conclusion

“There were numerous such [coping] poses. Some carried themselves with a sort of wistful resignation, others with pride or stiff soldierly discipline or good humor or macho zeal. They were afraid of dying but they were even more afraid to show it” (O’Brien 19). Tim O’Brien’s twenty-two stories attempt to illuminate the Vietnam conflict from the perspective of those who fought in it. Volkmer maintains that “O’Brien wants to pull the rug out from under the reader . . . [who will] never be allowed to settle into a truth, paradoxically . . . [getting] a ‘truer’ sense of the experience of Vietnam than a consistent narrative could do” (245). Volkmer also asserts that in *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien attacks any possible romantic treatment of the war, and he quotes O’Brien’s contempt on the way war stories are usually told: “A true war story is never moral . . . nor suggest[s] models of proper human behavior . . . if you feel that some small bit of rectitude has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made the victim of a very old and terrible lie” (248). He also takes O’Brien’s words from “How to Tell a True War Story,” where O’Brien says that stories about Vietnam “do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis” (249) and that his “[r]everence for story is what raises O’Brien’s book above nearly all the imaginative representations of the Vietnam War . . . [and] without glamorizing the obscenity of [it], he achieves the beauty of art, and the ring of truth” (254). And this is what makes O’Brien’s fictional assemblage so true. It can’t be more real because it is told through the eyes of someone who was there, someone who talked the talk because he walked the walk. Chen also focuses on the importance of O’Brien’s storytelling and the soldiers’ confrontation with combat. She centers on the men’s sense of exile before, during, and after the war. Her thesis suggests that “[i]f the Vietnam War has been figured as a ‘disruption’ of America’s self-narration as nation, its rupturing of ‘our story’ has none of the

glamour or play that characterizes postmodernism” (78). She says that O’Brien’s work comes down to gut instinct and that the stories are truly told and make “the stomach believe” (77), that the stories focus on a soldier’s inability to fit in, both in the war and away from it, and without the ties created and shared by the men, they were lost. She argues that *The Things They Carried* “is a book about the need to tell stories, the ways to tell stories, and the reasons for telling stories . . . guided nonetheless by an impulse to tell the truth” (94, 80) even though for O’Brien, as stated in the short story collection, the truth is ugly (80). It is ugly because O’Brien lived it. He is telling the real story. He shows how a collection of boys had to quickly become men and fight a war they didn’t believe in. He describes how they dealt with pressures not only to stay alive but to look good while doing it. The reader’s view, because of his truthful fiction, is not “ugly.” It is beautiful and is real.

O’Brien questions the presumed devotion to one of the oldest male credos, voiced in his *If I Die in a Combat Zone*: to be courageous and to obsess about “duty for the sake of honor, God, and country . . .” (192). Horner says that in “no literature about the war theater do we come to this intersection of courage more honestly than in the example of Alpha Company struggling under the fire of bullets, duty, pride and self-preservation” (266). In fact, Horner uses a passage from “The Things They Carried,” the collection’s title piece, to show this: “For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity. Now and then, however, there were times of panic, when they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn’t, when they twitched and made moaning sounds . . .” (O’Brien 18). This look at masculinity, the soldiers’ desire and desperation to be the ideal male, is also seen in Smiley’s piece. Smiley’s study asserts that soldiers in O’Brien’s novel desire women to understand their combat situations, and this need creates, shapes, and changes their masculinity. The men of Alpha Company, she says, need “to make the

Marthas who stayed home during the sixties and seventies . . . understand their brothers, friends and lovers who went to Vietnam. This O'Brien . . . accomplishes through . . . Martha, Mary Ann, Lemon's sister . . . and Linda" (602). Through these female characters, he "de-genders war, constructs an ideal female reader and re-defines American masculinity" (602). His use of strong, independent, and sometimes aloof female characters attracts the same type of female reader, and this loosens cultural gender stereotypes. This slackening of restraints allows O'Brien to portray his fellow soldier as who they are: men who lack the afore-mentioned patriarchal definition of American masculinity. But when these influential women don't understand, are not available, or are not willing to be there for these men, they lean on each other to rise above the death and destruction they face. Lorrie Smith argues that the book has an "obsession with and ambivalence about representations of masculinity . . ." (16) and further claims that from a masculinist and American perspective, O'Brien "celebrates the reconstructive power of the imagination, which gives shape, substance, and significance to slippery emotion and memory" (17). And from this viewpoint, *The Things They Carried* contributes substantially to the canon of Vietnam War fiction:

It dismantles many stereotypes that have dominated Hollywood treatments of the Vietnam War and distorted our understanding: the basket-case veteran (the book's narrator is reasonably well-adjusted, the macho war lover (characters . . . are presented as extreme aberrations), the callous officer (Jimmy Cross is fallible and sympathetic) . . . The book probes the vulnerability of soldiers betrayed by cultural myths and registers how deeply war in our culture is a gendered activity. (38)

O'Brien's stories portray the truth. The author is a calm, docile intellectual who wants nothing more than to avoid battle and return to the States to continue his education. Cross is a meek

young man who stumbled his way around the object of his affection, not having the confidence to do what he wanted or say what he felt. His individual characters were “everyman,” because that is what the U.S. military deployed to Vietnam.

Often, though, the gender dichotomies are blurred, as the men of Alpha Company flee and travel to the more acceptable “war community,” one that expects and embraces dominant masculinity. David Jarraway indicates that the war was a waste, that the soldiers had strong feelings of inadequacy trying to live up to societal expectations (696). The Alpha members seek to be part of a brotherhood with members of their own company who can truly empathize and relate. The men they fight are the springboard for the recapture of the soldiers’ souls. O’Brien “will hew to that loss of the definite, and elsewhere insist on the war’s ‘uncertainty,’ its ‘mystery,’ and what he candidly admits is sometimes ‘just beyond telling’” (Jarraway 699). This uncertainty from the author fashions sympathy and empathy in the reader. And this much-needed empathy is found in closer circles within Alpha Company. Fossie, Cross, O’Brien, and Kiowa, to name a few, relate to guys like Norman Bowker, and they keep soldiers like him afloat and healthy but as a result of his war experiences and the loss of this unique group once he leaves the war and returns home, he loses his grip. After his return from the war, as he aimlessly drives through his hometown of Des Moines, his “endless circling [literally and figuratively] also brings round once again both the self-preserving and the self-denying forms of recovery at the very catastrophic center of the literature of witness” (705).

Monique Wittig says, “In the case of women, ideology goes far since our bodies as well as our minds are the product of this manipulation. We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond, feature by feature, with the *idea* of nature that has been established for us” (982). The same can be said for men. Cross and O’Brien were not born to be soldiers. It was

not in their natures to be. Bowker, Kiowa, and Kiley were not inherently ready for war. They were witness to it and expected to be: “They are seen as black, therefore they are black; they are seen as women, therefore they are women. But before being seen that way, they first had to be made that way” (984). They are seen as soldiers; therefore, they are soldiers. But the ideal soldier is, like the ideal male, a fabrication. Soldiers are like Cross, Kiowa, and Bowker. They are scared. They are emotional. They lack the masculinity created and disseminated by the Hollywood producer. They cannot be what they are not. And they are insecure to show it. What is expected of soldiers is unnatural. Soldiers are not born. They are made. O’Brien didn’t want to leave Minnesota. He didn’t want to forfeit what awaited him at Harvard. He didn’t want to fight in Vietnam. But he did want to tell a real story about what this looked and felt like, and in his fictional collection, he told that truth. Similar to many young men who were drafted to fight into the Vietnam War, homosocial bonds present between O’Brien and his brothers-in-arms show how the pressures created by familial, societal, and national expectations can be managed and even overcome when the soldiers are surrounded and supported by men who share similar experiences and circumstances that keep them above the fray and hell of war.

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