A Rumor of War

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PHILIP CAPUTO

Philip Caputo was raised in Westchester, Illinois, a comfortable suburb west of Chicago. He is the son of middle-class Italian-American parents. He attended Purdue and Loyola Universities, graduating from the latter in 1964. Caputo enlisted in the Marines in 1960 and attended Officer Candidate School while still at university. After graduation, he was sent to Okinawa. He was then among the first American soldiers to be deployed to Vietnam in 1965, during the first years of the war. He served in the Marine Corps for three years, including a 16-month tour of duty in Vietnam. Caputo left Vietnam, as a soldier, in July 1966 and was discharged from the Marine Corps in mid-1967, after doing a final tour as the commanding officer of an infantry training company in North Carolina. He briefly became a part of the antiwar movement but did not commit to it. In 1968, Caputo started his career in journalism, first working for the Chicago *Tribune* as a general assignment and team investigative reporter until 1972. That year, he won a Pulitzer Prize, shared with several other reporters, for team investigative reporting on voting fraud in Chicago. He then spent the next five years working as a foreign correspondent in Rome, Beirut, Moscow, and Saigon, where he witnessed the Viet Cong's invasion and the fall of Saigon in 1975. That same year, he left journalism to devote his time to writing books and magazine articles. His debut novel, *Horn of Africa*, was a finalist for the National Book Award in 1980. Caputo is married to Leslie Ware, a former editor for *Consumer Reports* magazine, and they divide their time between Connecticut and Arizona. Caputo is also the father of two sons from a previous marriage—Marc, a political reporter for Politico, and Geoffrey, a jazz composer and music teacher.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The main events of *A Rumor of War* take place between 1960, when Caputo joins the Marines, and 1967, when he is discharged. John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States in 1960, after narrowly defeating Richard Nixon. Kennedy features prominently in Caputo's memory, for it was his message, "Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country," that prompted Caputo to join the armed services. Caputo was also swayed by Kennedy's belief that the United States had a key role to play during the Cold War—that is, to stamp out the seeds of Communism before they could take root. Caputo describes the years between Kennedy's election and his assassination in 1963 as a time driven by idealism and strong faith in one's government. However, for Americans who did not grow up in middle-class white suburbia, like Caputo did, things were quite different. The Civil Rights Movement was in full-force at this time. On August 28, 1963, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. In the summer of 1964, a group of black and white youths traveled to Mississippi to help black people register to vote. Three among them—Andrew Goodman, Michael "Mickey" Schwerner, and James Chaney—were murdered by white supremacists in Philadelphia, Mississippi. In 1965, black militancy became more popular among younger civil rights leaders, spurred by the example set by Malcolm X, who was assassinated on February 21, 1965 in Harlem. The Black Panther Party developed in Oakland, California in 1966. Stokely Carmichael became the leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and called for "Black Power" over civil disobedience, in the aftermath of James Meredith being shot at while taking his "Walk Against Fear" from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. Caputo returned to the United States in 1967, during the Summer of Love and the beginning of the "Flower Power" movement, which would breed many young antiwar activists and political radicals.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Philip Caputo's memoir emerged during a time in which the United States was eager to reflect on the Vietnam War. The conflict changed Americans' understandings of their cultural values and their diplomatic role in the world. A plethora of books and films on the subject emerged during the mid-1970s and the 1980s. In the Postscript, Caputo mentions other Vietnam War memoirs that he admires, including Ron Kovic's *Born on the Fourth of July*, which was also adapted into a film. Other accounts of the Vietnam War include *Bloods*, an oral history of the Vietnam War from the perspective of Black American veterans, and James R. McDonough's *Platoon Leader: A Memoir of Command in Combat*. McDonough's book is very similar to Caputo's in that it, too, tells the story of a Marine Corps officer who comes of age during the Vietnam War. More recent works include Karl Marlantes's *Matterhorn: A Novel of the Vietnam War*, which also tells the story of a young Marine Corps lieutenant who becomes a man amidst the terror of fighting a guerilla war in the jungle.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Rumor of War
- **When Written:** Spring 1967-September 1976
- **Where Written:** Camp Lejeune, North Carolina; Pine Creek, Montana

- **When Published:** May 1977
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Westchester, Illinois; Quantico, Virginia; Okinawa, Japan; Da Nang, South Vietnam; Saigon, South Vietnam
- **Climax:** Caputo privately declares "a truce" between himself and the Viet Cong, accepts the futility of the war, and dedicates himself to living on his own terms.
- **Antagonist:** The Vietnam War; the military-industrial complex
- **Point of View:** First-person

EXTRA CREDIT

The TV Miniseries. In 1980, *A Rumor of War* aired as a two-part miniseries starring Brad Davis as Philip Caputo, and co-starring Brian Dennehy and Keith Carradine. Some soldiers' names are changed in the film, though Caputo also used fictional names in some places in the memoir. In the film, Walter Levy becomes "Walter Cohen" and José Gonzalez becomes "José Ramirez." The miniseries was, along with the feature films *The Deer Hunter* and *Apocalypse Now*, one of the first to take a critical view of the Vietnam War and the United States' role in the conflict.

South Korea's Role in Vietnam. In the Prologue to *A Rumor of War*, Caputo describes the South Korean division's efforts in Vietnam as "probably the most bloody-minded." Unlike the United States and France, South Korea is seldom discussed in relation to the Vietnam War. In February 1968, South Korean troops, ordered to Vietnam by former general and coup leader President Park Chung-hee, killed 69 Vietnamese people in Phong Nhi and in neighboring Phong Nat. News media took less interest in these atrocities than in those committed during the My Lai massacre, which occurred one month later.

PLOT SUMMARY

Philip Caputo starts his memoir, *A Rumor of War*, by declaring that it is not an historical account but simply a book about war, and about what happens to people as a result of conducting war. Caputo enters the Marine Corps in 1960, attracted by the allure of adventure and danger. He grows up in Westchester, Illinois, a western suburb of Chicago, and longs to escape from the dullness of his Middle-American suburb. He also gets caught up in Kennedy-era idealism and sees military service as the proper response to the president's call for public service, as well as the way to demonstrate opposition to the spread of Communism. After graduating from Loyola University in 1964, Caputo goes to Quantico, Virginia for Officers' Basic School for a six-month apprenticeship before being sent to his first assignment.

Caputo's first command as a second lieutenant is in a rifle platoon in the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Marine Division. He is stationed in Okinawa, Japan in January 1965, where he enjoys a life of relative ease. Rumors float of a possible deployment to Vietnam. After several false starts, the battalion is shipped out to Da Nang in South Vietnam. Initially, their purpose is only to provide defense for the ARVN. However, as the war progresses, and infighting among the South Vietnamese distracts them from their original purpose of defeating the Viet Cong, the Marine Corps takes on the brunt of the battle.

Caputo describes a war that is less defined by excitement than it is by endless waiting—they experience more conflict with mosquitos, snakes, and centipedes than with the enemy. In instances in which there are skirmishes, or someone is unlucky enough to step on a mine, the war reveals its savagery. Bodies are mutilated beyond recognition, men lose limbs, or, in some cases, are rendered vegetables due to illness or heatstroke. As if this is not morbid enough, Caputo is transferred to regimental headquarters where he is assigned as an assistant adjutant, or an administrator whose job it is to report on the deaths of both members of the Marine Corps and the Viet Cong. Caputo declares himself "**Officer in Charge of the Dead**," due to his recording of the countless names of those who died in battle. One of the names that he comes across one day is that of First Lieutenant Walter Neville Levy, who dies while trying to save a marine who was already dead. Levy's death shakes Caputo; not only were they friends who shared a great deal in common, Levy was also a man whom Caputo admired. He begins to resent how the war is taking "good" men, which soon leads him to question the overall good of the war and if it is a worthy sacrifice for the lives of men like Levy, Sergeant Hugh John "Sully" Sullivan, and Caputo's former classmate at Quantico, Adam Simpson.

Caputo asks to be transferred out of his position as assistant adjutant, both due to boredom and a feeling of guilt that his fellow marines are suffering in the field while he enjoys a relatively easy (though depressing) job as a clerk. Ironically, he is assigned to replace Lieutenant Levy in C Company of the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. The war is intensifying—with more losses, it seems, on the American side. Caputo witnesses morally ambiguous moments, such as when his new skipper, Captain Neal, offers marines beer and extra free time to drink it for every dead VC the crew can bring him. When Lance Corporal Crowe one day returns with the news that two of the VC suspects whom Lieutenant Murph McCloy previously cleared are, in fact, active guerrillas who build mines and booby traps, Caputo commits to getting them. He has a thirst to kill, fostered in the marines, as well as a desire to get revenge on those who have helped to shed the blood of his friends and comrades-in-arms. He organizes a patrol team, including Crowe, Allen, Thornhill, and two riflemen, to capture the VCs. If they resist, he orders the men to kill their enemies. The crew

returns with two bodies, though there is initial uncertainty that one of them is the right body. Crowe has told Caputo that Le Dung was the younger man who informed him that the two older men were VC. However, Le Dung ends up being one of the men, along with Le Du, whom the marines bring in dead.

Crowe and Caputo are later brought up on charges of murder and conspiring to commit murder, but the charges against both are later dropped. Caputo leaves Vietnam in 1965. He returns to the country in 1975, as a foreign correspondent. He witnesses the North Vietnamese Army's entry into the city and the surrender of the South Vietnamese Army. The conflict is finally over. The United States' moral fight for democracy in Vietnam was, for Caputo, all for naught.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Philip Caputo – Philip Caputo is a middle-class suburbanite from Westchester, Illinois. After flunking out of Purdue University, he moves back in with his family, much to his own disappointment, and attends Loyola University. He joins the Marines in 1960, inspired by President Kennedy's message that young people should perform more public service. His contempt for Communism and his desire to rebel against his parents' expectations are also driving forces in his decision to enlist. He graduates from Loyola and attends Officer Candidate School. In exchange for a commission, he agrees to serve three years on active duty. Caputo's first command is a rifle platoon in a battalion of the 3rd Marine Division on Okinawa. He then goes to Vietnam on March 8, 1965 as a second lieutenant with a battalion of the 9th Marine Expeditionary Force, the first combat unit sent to Indochina. His next job is as an assistant adjutant who reports on the war dead, both from the Marines and among the Viet Cong. Caputo morbidly nicknames himself "**Officer in Charge of the Dead**." After the Marines threaten to prosecute him for murder, Caputo is transferred from the battalion and works as an assistant operations officer at regimental headquarters for the duration of the investigation. He is found not-guilty. After being discharged from the Marine Corps in 1967 after his three-year enlistment, Caputo joins the Vietnam Veterans Against the War at age twenty-four. In 1970, he sends his **campaign medals** to President Nixon along with a letter detailing his opposition to American policies in Indochina. Caputo then works as a journalist in Beirut as a Middle East correspondent. By 1975, Caputo is a war correspondent in Saigon with the Chicago *Tribune*. He returns to Da Nang, the part of Vietnam that he knows best, to cover the enemy's offensive there, along with Ron Yates.

Corporal Banks – The 1st squad leader in the 2nd platoon, C Company, 1st Battalion of the 3rd Marines in place of Sergeant Gordon, who is temporarily attached to D Company. Caputo describes as "a soft-spoken" black man who fought in Korea. Though this experience makes him seem like "a living relic" to the much younger squad, he is only thirty or thirty-one.

Corporal José Gonzalez – The 3rd squad leader in the 2nd platoon, C Company, 1st Battalion of the 3rd Marines. Caputo describes him as "short, stock, pugnacious but likeable." Gonzalez is the first casualty of the war in their platoon. He steps on a small antipersonnel mine and is "blasted into the air." Caputo recalls how "his left foot turned into a mass of bruised and bloody meat inside the tatters of his boot." He is carried to safety by Lance Corporal Sampson. Gonzalez has his foot amputated and recovers at the Oakland Naval Hospital.

Lance Corporal Sampson – A twenty-five year old with a seven-year career in the Marines. He carries Corporal José Gonzalez to safety after he gets his left foot blown apart due to stepping on a mine. Sampson crawls on his belly and uses his bayonet to feel for additional mines. After clearing a path, he flings Gonzalez on his shoulders and carries him out of the field. For his bravery, Sampson is recommended for a Bronze Star, which he eventually receives. He is then reduced to PFC for the second time after going AWOL in Da Nang. Caputo describes Sampson as a "sloppy, careless man" but a good field soldier. He is someone who needs "the stimulus of hardship or danger to display his better characteristics."

Lance Corporal James Bryce – A tall, quiet man from Kansas. Something seems to be "preying" on Bryce's mind, but he keeps it to himself, and Caputo does not hear Bryce "speak more than a few dozen words" during the whole time that they know each other. When their C-130 takes off from Okinawa, heading to Vietnam, Caputo watches Bryce sleep. His utter stillness and half-open mouth are "a prefiguration of the death that would be his six months later." In July 1965, Bryce is killed by a grenade. Caputo later helps to identify Bryce's body after Corporal Gunderson brings it in, along with the bodies of PFC Peter Devlin and PFC Lockhart. Caputo notices "the nakedness of Bryce's left calf bone." He sees that every bit of flesh and muscle has been stripped from it, causing the splintered bone to look "like a broken ivory stick." Gunderson says that they found his boot with the foot still in it.

Morrisson – A marine with "beefy, hairy arms" who asks Caputo if he will have a drink with him and Lance Corporal Marshall in Simone's during their liberty period in Da Nang. Morrisson talks tough and tells Caputo about his mad scheme to make a "night parachute over the Laotian border," and then work their way back to Da Nang on foot, ambushing VC along the way.

PFC Lockhart – A "quiet" and "sensitive" man who strikes Caputo as tenderhearted, despite having grown up "on the harsh streets of Chicago's South Side." He is a close friend of PFC Peter Devlin. Caputo recalls that he had difficulty doing push-ups. Later, his body is brought in by Corporal Gunderson, along with those of Devlin and Lance Corporal James Bryce.

Lockhart is killed by a concussion at the age of nineteen.

Sergeant William "Wild Bill" Campbell – The platoon sergeant. He is thirty-six years old, and a veteran of the Korean War as well as "countless barroom brawls in most of the ports between Naples and Yokohma." Caputo describes him as someone who fits Hollywood's vision of what a Marine sergeant would look like. Campbell is red-haired, six-feet and three inches tall, and weighs two hundred and twenty pounds. He has a faith in the Marine Corps akin to a Jesuit's faith in the Catholic Church. He disdains the Navy, the Army, the Congress, motherhood, and officers—in that order. Caputo recalls how he walked down a street, "straight-backed and swaggering in a uniform bleached white by tropic suns," and how he glared "scornfully" at people from beneath the bill of his faded cap. Campbell walks with a slight limp due to the frostbite that he suffered in the Chosin Reservoir in 1950.

PFC Buchanan – A marine who is helping Caputo and Sergeant Gordon man the outpost that is "a thousand yards forward of C Company's lines." Caputo thinks that boredom has led to terror, causing the private to shoot "several shots at something he heard moving in front of his position." Though Caputo tries to ease the young man's mind, Buchanan remains crouched down, with his finger on the trigger of his rifle, staring tensely at the jungle.

PFC Esposito – A grenadier in one of Caputo's squads. Esposito is "stocky" and "dark-skinned." Due to a serious illness, he is going to be evacuated back to the United States. He has been in the Marines for four years and talks about going home, but he is ambivalent due to his loyalty to the battalion and a wish to remain with Corporal Parker, his friend since boot camp.

Corporal Parker – The best friend of PFC Esposito. Caputo watches Parker talk to Esposito, who is heavily drugged and lying on a cot. The men reminisce about their friendship, and Caputo feels slightly embarrassed, as though he is "listening in on the conversation of two lovers who are about to be separated."

Hanson – A quiet boy who is about nineteen years old. He is tall and thin with dark blond hair. Caputo describes him as "so American-looking [that] he could have posed for a Norman Rockwell in the old *Saturday Evening Post*." Sergeant Loker tells Caputo that he caught Hanson trying to cut the ears off of dead VC, mimicking the Australian soldiers who took ears as souvenirs.

First Sergeant Fred Wagoner – The company first sergeant. He is "a heavyset man whose thin, gray hair and steel-rimmed glasses" make him look like "a stern grandfather." Wagoner likes the formalities of military bureaucracy; when Caputo tries to turn in some signed blank fitness report forms, Wagoner tells him to sign a set of fresh forms, due to Caputo having used blue ink instead of the Marine Corps' standard black ink.

Lieutenant Colonel Bain – The commanding officer at Camp Schwab in Okinawa, Japan. Caputo describes Bain as "a brusque, hulking man with a face that [manages] to be ugly and attractive at the same time." His nose has been hit and, as a result, looks "too big." His flesh looks "seamed" and his eyes "worn." His face, Caputo thinks, tells a more comprehensive story about his service than his service record book and the ribbons on his chest. Caputo contrasts Bain, who seems tough and authentic, with General Karsch, who seems more concerned with appearances and protocol.

General Karsch – The brigade's commanding general, or brigadier, in Da Nang. He is tall and wears a green ascot with a starched battle jacket. His boots and the stars on his collar shine, and "a kite-tail of staff officers" follow him around when he tours the perimeter. Caputo describes his voice as having "insincere friendliness," not unlike "the voice of a campaigning politician." Caputo contrasts him with the more rugged Lieutenant Colonel Bain.

Lieutenant Murph McCloy – A platoon commander in Charley Company, or C Company in the 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines. Caputo describes him as a "slender, straw-blond Kentuckian" who is able to ignore the unpleasant aspects of war in favor of his romantic vision of soldiering. Later, Caputo finds out that he has extended his tour and becomes the executive officer of C Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.

Captain Anderson – Caputo's new boss when he assumes administrative duties. Anderson is "pudgy" and has a belly that bulges against his sweaty undershirt and hangs over his belt. Caputo also notes that the man has a pig-like face, complete with a large head, a weak chin, and small eyes "closely set in folds of sunburned flesh."

Sergeant Hugh John "Sully" Sullivan – Mentioned in the book's epitaph, Sullivan is a member of C Company, 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines and is killed in action in June 1965. Caputo describes him as a tall and skinny twenty-two-year-old from Pennsylvania who seems even younger than he is. Caputo first meets him when he is a corporal and the leader of a machine-gun squad that is attached to Caputo's platoon for some time. He tires some of the other Marines because he is due to become a sergeant, but he refuses to behave like one. Caputo recalls him as a "a gangly egalitarian," described by one of his hecklers as a "goddamned diddy-bopper." Sullivan has a "casual" gait and an "irreverent sense of humor." When he gives orders, it sounds more as though he is making requests. His elders complain that his eventual promotion is a sign of the deterioration of the Marine Corps. Sullivan gives Caputo a cigar back in March or early April after receiving a letter from his wife saying that he is the father of a newborn son. Sullivan is killed by a sniper while refilling canteens near the Song Yen River.

Ingram – A marine who is hit in the back during a skirmish and, as a result, may never walk again. Ingram is sent to a hospital in Tennessee to recuperate. Caputo recalls Ingram, a fellow marine from his former battalion, as a "big, barrel-chested" man

who strides powerfully and has a rich baritone singing-voice. Ingram is hit shortly after Sullivan is killed. Lemmon explains that Ingram refused to stay low and crawl on his belly, making it easy for the sniper to hit him.

Colonel Wheeler – The commanding officer at regimental headquarters, where Caputo assumes his administrative position. In the mess hall, Wheeler sits at the head of a U-shaped table during meals. He later orders Caputo to arrange for the bodies of VC to be brought back to regimental headquarters so that General Thompson can view them after their briefing.

Lieutenant Frank Reasoner – A short, stocky twenty-nine-year-old who is ex-enlisted. He worked his way through the ranks to become a first lieutenant. He was a husband and a father whom Caputo liked a lot for "his air of quiet maturity." A few hours after he and Caputo split a beer, a helicopter returns his body. Reasoner has been shot across the belly by a machine gun. During a patrol, Reasoner's company ran into a couple of "enemy machine-gun nests." He charged one of the guns single-handedly, "knocking it out of action." He then fired his carbine at the second gun and ran to pick up one of his wounded. He was killed in the process. He is posthumously awarded the Congressional **Medal** of Honor, and a camp and a ship are both named after him.

Lieutenant Parsons – A lieutenant in E Company, 2nd Battalion who is killed two nights after Lieutenant Frank Reasoner by one of the marines' own 4.2-inch mortar shells. The shell falls on his platoon while he is briefing them in the "rear area" base camp. Parsons's legs are "scythed off at the hip" as a result.

PFC Peter Devlin – PFC Lockhart's friend. Caputo describes the nineteen-year-old as "an all-American boy," with blond hair, blue eyes, and the body of "a middleweight wrestler."Corporal Gunderson later finds him dead, and Caputo helps to identify his body. Devlin had once gotten into trouble for sleeping on post, and Caputo made a plea of leniency for him because he was generally a good marine. The skipper let him off with a warning, and Devlin thanked Caputo for the favor.

Harris – A marine in the 2nd Battalion who, like Olson, survived "half a dozen operations and a number of combat patrols." According to Caputo, both Harris and Olson suffered from "combat madness"—a sense of war weariness in which one can only look forward to killing and seeing others killed. One night, in the midst of spending four months in the jungle with no relief and little sleep, Harris tells Olson that it is his turn to go on watch. Olson refuses and an argument ensues; Olson challenges Harris to kill him, and Harris promptly pumps five or six bullets from his automatic rifle into Olson's skull at point-blank range. Other marines witness the event and later serve as witnesses when Harris is court-martialed.

Olson – A marine in the 2nd Battalion who survived "half a dozen operations and a number of combat patrols." Caputo believes that Olson and his fellow marine, Harris, suffered from "combat madness"—a sense of war weariness in which one can only look forward to killing and seeing others killed. Olson and Harris spend four months in the jungle with no relief and no more than three or four hours of sleep per night. One night, he tells Harris that he will not go out on watch, though it is his turn. Harris, in furious revenge, pumps five or six bullets from his automatic rifle into Olson's skull at point-blank range. Other marines stand by and witness the event.

Colonel Nickerson – The regiment's new commanding officer, whom Caputo describes as being "broad-backed" and "thick-necked." Nickerson takes command in late August after Colonel Wheeler is sent back to the United States due to illness. Nickerson is loud and profane but likes socializing with the junior officers and enlisted men. He is also subject to quick, violent shifts in mood. In his good moments, he is warm, affectionate, and works hard at being a combat officer. In his foul moods, he delights in being unreasonable and confuses petty objectives for important ones. He also demands a great deal of work from his soldiers.

First Lieutenant Walter Neville Levy – Mentioned in the book's epitaph and emblematized by Caputo as someone who performs an "act of shining self-sacrifice." He is a member of C Company, First Battalion, First Marines and is killed in action in September 1965. Levy is of an upper-class, Jewish background and attended Columbia University. In contrasting Levy with himself, Caputo mentions how Levy is even-tempered while he is hot-tempered. Caputo also contrasts his personal reasons for joining the Marines with Levy's nobler patriotism.

Lance Corporal Crowe – A short, stocky man and "an expert with the sawed-off twelve-gauge" that he carries. The teenage platoon nicknames him "Pappy" since he's twenty-three years old. His appearance fits his nickname, as the months of sleep deprivation, wincing at snipers' bullets, and the stress of constantly looking for trip wires have physically aged him. Along with Caputo, Crowe is later brought up on murder charges, after the deaths of two Viet Cong, Le Dung and Le Du. He, too, is acquitted.

Lonehill – A marine who is "a full-blooded Comanche from Oklahoma." Caputo also mentions that Lonehill is "a crack shot," meaning that he is very good at shooting his intended target. Lonehill stands at six-feet-two and has such a mean stare that it "[makes] you choose your words carefully when you [speak] to him."

McKenna – The 3rd platoon leader. He joins C Company after Caputo goes to the One-One Battalion. He is "a dark-haired, jive-talking Bronx Irishman" and conceives of the war as "a street gang-fight on a grand scale." One day, he shoots an old woman for in the chest for no good reason and later admits that it does not bother him that he killed her.

Corporal Rodella – A marine who was wounded twice before

but is severely wounded when a piece of shrapnel tears a hole into one of his lungs. Caputo recounts how his injury leaves him in danger of drowning in his own blood, and that Rodella appears sorrowful—with the "hurt, dumb eyes of a child"—in response to his injury. He recuperates later in a hospital and then is evacuated out of Vietnam.

Major General Lew Walt – An officer whom Caputo admires because he is "an authentic hero." Walt won three Navy Crosses, "one for single-handedly pulling an artillery piece uphill under heavy Japanese fire during a battle in the South Pacific." Walt also insists on leading his soldiers "from up front," not from "a cushy command post" far removed from the action. He has recently taken command of the III MAF, or the Third Marine Amphibious Force, which is the headquarters for all Marine units in Vietnam.

Le Dung – The younger of a group of three men whom Lieutenant Murph McCloy and an ARVN sergeant question for being VC suspects. According to Lance Corporal Crowe, he meets Le Dung again and the young man points out the two men, including Le Du, whom he had been with previously as guerrillas who make mines and booby traps. However, Le Dung also ends up being one of the men whom Crowe, Allen, Thornhill, and two riflemen capture and kill during a patrol.

Le Du – One of the Viet Cong whom Caputo and Lance Corporal Crowe are charged with murdering. Initially, Le Du presents forged papers to Lieutenant Murph McCloy and an ARVN sergeant, falsifying his age. According to Crowe, Le Dung later points him out as a guerrilla who makes mines and booby traps. Le Du is later captured and killed by Crowe, Allen, Thornhill, and two riflemen during a patrol.

General Thi – Commander of I Corps who is placed under arrest by the head of the Saigon government, Nguyen Cao Ky, for being suspected of plotting a coup. ARVN divisions rallied to General Thi's support at his headquarters in Da Nang. Caputo mentions General Thi in the context of describing how the ARVN'S "intramural feud" diminished their attention to the VC, causing U.S. Marines to pick up the slack.

Ron Yates – Caputo's colleague from the Chicago *Tribune* who is the newspaper's regular correspondent in the Far East in 1975. Yates goes with Caputo to the UPI offices in Saigon, where they find as much confusion there as elsewhere in the city, due to an impending invasion from the North Vietnamese Army. Caputo later offers to assist Yates in covering the North Vietnamese offense.

Nick Proffitt – The correspondent for *Newsweek*. He is staying in the same hotel as Caputo, the Continental Palace Hotel in Saigon. Caputo moves into Proffitt's room two floors below after "an enemy rocket had devastated the top floors of the nearby Metropole Hotel." Caputo identifies with Proffitt because he, too, is "an 'old' Indochina hand." Proffitt began working as a correspondent in Vietnam in the late-1960s and early-1970s. They also worked together in Beirut as Middle East correspondents for their respective publications.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Sergeant McClellan – The man who leads Caputo and other aspiring lieutenants in close-order drills at Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia. Caputo describes McClellan as "a nervously energetic" black man "whose muscles looked as hard and wiry as underground telephone cables."

Corporal Mixon – The 2nd squad leader in the 2nd platoon, C Company, 1st Battalion of the 3rd Marines. Caputo describes him as "thin and almost delicate-looking, with a shy, diffident manner."

Lance Corporal Marshall – A car enthusiast who joined the Marine Corps to save enough money to buy a faster car than his "chopped Chevy."

PFC Christwell – A seventeen-year-old radioman whom Caputo describes as "reedy" and "sandy-haired." To Caputo, he looks more like a basketball player and has the "irritating and unbreakable habit of addressing officers in the archaic third-person."

PFCs Bradley and Deane – A pair of friends from North Carolina who are "natural infantrymen." Caputo recalls their ability to "walk forever and through anything." They also tend to "feel nothing but a cheerful contempt for physical adversities."

Lieutenant Calley – An officer whom Caputo mentions as one of the Marines who discovered in his "bottommost depths a capacity for malice they probably never suspected was there." Caputo uses him as an example of how war in "a geographical wilderness" can bring out the worst in a person.

Sergeant Gordon – Caputo describes Gordon as "a short, pink-faced career marine." They are sitting in the platoon command post on the afternoon of the third day of his platoon's manning of an outpost some distance away from C Company's lines. Gordon talks to Caputo about fear and bravery.

General Greene – The Marine Corps commandant who issues an inspection tour of Vietnam. When addressing a group of Marines, he tells them that their only mission is to kill the VC.

PFC "Pappy" White – Nicknamed based on his "advanced" age, White is twenty-nine and helps to kill nearly a dozen VC positioned along a ridge, including an enemy soldier of about eighteen or nineteen, who is hit twice in his stomach.

Powell – A machine-gunner who suffers from heatstroke one day while out in the field. His body temperature reaches one hundred and nine degrees, and the navy doctor determines that, if he survives, he will probably suffer permanent brain damage. Powell is evacuated back to the United States.

Lance Corporal Stone – C Company's only casualty during the firefight that leads to the destruction of Giao-Tri, a hamlet near

Hoi-Vuc. He is grazed on the hand by a bullet from an AK-47.

Sergeant Loker – Loker leads a patrol that runs into Caputo's platoon after the latter burned down a base camp. He tells Caputo a story about catching a marine named Hanson cutting the ears off of dead VC.

Sergeant Johnson – A Korean War veteran whom Caputo describes as having "a face as seamed as a well-worked mine shaft."

Corporal Banks – The first squad leader in place of Sergeant Gordon.

Lance Corporal Reed – The driver of Peterson's jeep. He takes Caputo, McCloy, Peterson, and Sergeant Loker to Da Nang for a liberty period.

Simone – The owner of a bar and brothel bearing her name. She is an "adventuress" of Thai, Cambodian, and French descent. Simone was born in Bangkok. Her ambition is to marry an American and go to the United States.

Joe Feeley – The company executive officer. He lectures Caputo about demonstrating more competence after Caputo foolishly lights a cigarette during a training exercise in Okinawa. He also encourages Caputo to take command more assertively from Sergeant William Campbell.

Lieutenant Glen Lemmon – A platoon commander in Charley Company, or C Company.

Gunnery Sergeant Marquand – Charley Company's gunnery sergeant. Caputo describes him as "a broad-chested cheerful man" who keeps the company alert by predicting possible attacks.

Peterson – The skipper, or captain, of the 1st Battalion of the 3rd Marines. Caputo describes Peterson as "tall" and "boyish-looking."

Lieutenant Bruce Tester – A platoon commander in Charley Company, or C Company of the 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines.

Jim Cooney – Caputo's roommate in Okinawa. In August 1965, he loses half of his platoon at the Battle of Chu Lai. He is later brought in from 3rd Battalion to replace Caputo as assistant adjutant at regimental headquarters.

Sergeant Colby – Murph McCloy's platoon sergeant. He once tells Caputo that he is going to make every marine look at the first man who is KIA, so that they can understand the seriousness of war. He changes his mind about this after Sergeant Sullivan dies.

Guiliumet and Paulson – The two marines whose foxhole Caputo jumps into while he is doing nighttime patrols of the platoon lines. They are nervous when he enters because they have nearly been hit by sniper fire on the company's first night in Vietnam.

Lieutenant Bradley – The battalion motor transport officer who nicknamed the Vietnam War the "splendid little war" during the Expeditionary Brigade's first few weeks in the country, which are rather peaceful.

Widener – A marine from southern Indiana who is the platoon radio operator, replacing another marine named Christwell. Widener has a "shrill, twanging voice," reminding Caputo of a disc jockey for a country music radio station.

PFC Marsden – A grenadier in Glen Lemmon's platoon who kills a VC under dubious circumstances. He shoots the man in the face with a pistol but registers confusion at his own actions.

Rivera – Caputo identifies him as "the point man."

Lance Corporal Kazmarack – The driver for adjutants, or officers who are assigned to administrative tasks. After Caputo returns from training in Japan on June 15, Kazmarack picks him up from the airfield in Da Nang, Vietnam.

Lieutenant Schwartz – The officer whom Caputo replaces when he assumes administrative duties. Schwartz is happy to leave headquarters in exchange for taking command of a rifle company in the 2nd Battalion.

Gallardo – A corporal in the 1st platoon who runs out onto the LZ during a fire-fight with the VC and guides medevac helicopters in so that they can land and collect casualties.

Lieutenant Colonel Meyers – One of the regiment's battalion commanders. He steps on a booby-trapped 155-mm shell during combat and his body is blown apart.

Webb Harrisson – One of the assistant operations officers at regimental headquarters.

Lieutenant Colonel Brooks – The executive officer at regimental headquarters. He is a bald and stocky man whom the other troops have nicknamed "Elmer Fudd" due to his resemblance to the cartoon character.

General Thompson – A general from Military Assistance Command Vietnam, which is General William Westmoreland's headquarters.

Corporal Stasek – A clerk who helps Lance Corporal Kazmarack take the corpses of dead VC to an enemy cemetery in Vietnam, and then brings them back for Colonel Wheeler to show off to General Thompson.

Chaplain Ryerson – A "thin and cheerless" man who confronts Caputo in the mess hall with questions about the morality of the war.

Milsovic – The medical officer. Caputo describes him as "heavyset and jolly." He is present during Chaplain Ryerson's lecture in the mess hall about the morality of being in Vietnam.

Sergeant Hamilton – The chief clerk at regimental headquarters.

Corporal Brian Gauthier – A twenty-one-year-old squad leader in A Company who is mortally wounded in an ambush on July 11. He receives a posthumous **medal** for continuing to lead his men under enemy fire until he finally died from his

wounds. Later, the regimental HQ camp is named for him.

Nick Pappas – A college football star who trips a mine that puts him in a wheelchair for nearly two years, permanently ending his football career.

Corporal Gunderson – A squad leader in C Company who finds the bodies of Devlin, Lockhart, and Bryce, soldiers from Caputo's old platoon.

Lieutenant Nargi – Major Burin's assistant. He is put in charge of Colonel Nickerson's "horseshoe pit."

Lieutenant Jones – The 1st Battalion adjutant who reports to Caputo about the death of First Lieutenant Walter Neville Levy.

Adam Simpson – A black officer who was Caputo's classmate at Quantico. He is killed during an ambush of his twenty-eight man patrol. His body is later found in the river.

Sergeant Hamilton – A sergeant whose sense of humor helps Caputo keeps his spirits up. Hamilton also suffers constantly from gastroenteritis.

Lieutenant Colonel Hatch – The commanding officer in the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.

Captain Neal – The skipper of C Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. He is a wiry man with bleak, pale blue eyes and "taut, thin lips." He reminds Caputo of a stern New England schoolmaster.

Sergeant Coffell – The second squad leader in C Company, 1st Battalion, 1st Marines. Like Caputo, he has been recently transferred from another battalion.

Sergeant Horne – A "big, bull-chested," mustachioed soldier who kicks and violently shakes a marine who begins sobbing and rolling in the mud out of exasperation with fighting the war.

Allen – One of the marines who is part of a patrol that Caputo organizes, along with Lonehill, Lance Corporal Crowe, and two riflemen, to capture two VC who have been making mines and booby traps.

Sergeant Wehr – The platoon guide. He has just arrived in Vietnam and, in response to an attack from the Viet Cong near the Song Tuy Loan, behaves as though he is "a little bewildered by the invisible [shots] crackling in the air."

Jones – A small man, nicknamed "Little Jones," who is the radio operator for C Company in the 1st Battalion, 1st Marines.

Sergeant Pryor – A sergeant in 1st Battalion, 1st Marines, C Company who is with Caputo during a shrapnel attack that severely injures Sanchez, Rodella, and Greeley.

Doc Kaiser – The corpsman who tries to save Corporal Rodella after a piece of shrapnel tears a hole in one of his lungs.

Corporal Greeley – A machine-gunner whose left arm is blown apart, leaving only "a few strands of muscle" where the limb was. Caputo contrasts Corporal Rodella's sorrowful reaction, similar to that of a child, with Greeley's indignant fury. He recuperates in a hospital and then is evacuated out of Vietnam.

Sanchez – A marine whose face gets sprayed with shrapnel during an ambush-detonated mine attack. Caputo recalls that his face looks as though he has been clawed by a beast.

Captain Greer – An intelligence officer who goes with Caputo to the division hospital to interview the survivors of "friendly fire," after the U.S. military bombed a dozen villages to attack enemy positions in the hills.

Lieutenant Jim Rader – Caputo's defense attorney during the Marine Corps' murder investigation. Rader wins Caputo's admiration because of his precision with language and attention to the facts.

Sergeant Coffell – A twenty-four-year-old marine who is one of the witnesses to Caputo's order to capture or kill the two members of the Viet Cong who initially eluded capture by pretending to be students.

Captain Greer – The intelligence officer in 1st Battalion, 3rd Marines.

Mora – The assistant intelligence officer.

TERMS

Viet Cong – Often abbreviated as "VC," the Viet Cong (or Viet Nam Cong San) was a guerilla force that, with the assistance of the North Vietnamese Army, fought against South Vietnam from the late-1950s to 1975 and against the United States from the early-1960s to 1973. The Viet Cong began as a collection of various factions who opposed the government of President Ngo Dinh Diem. The Viet Cong was the military arm of the National Liberation Front—a Communist organization whose goals were to overthrow the South Vietnamese government and to reunify North and South Vietnam. Most Viet Cong fighters were recruited from the South and were trained in guerilla warfare, including ambushes, terrorism, and forms of sabotage, such as buried landmines.

ARVN – Army of the Republic of Vietnam, also known as the South Vietnamese Army (SVA).

AWOL – Absent Without Leave.

NCO – Noncommissioned Officer.

PFC – Private First Class. In the U.S. Marine Corps, it is the second-lowest rank, above a private and below a lance corporal. A Private First Class is a Junior Enlisted and has an E-2 paygrade. Private First Class is also an enlistment rank in the U.S. Army.

Lance Corporal – In the U.S. Marine Corps, it is the third enlisted rank, above a Private First Class and directly below a corporal. A lance corporal is a Junior Enlisted and has an E-3 paygrade. Marines who are promoted to this rank are expected

to demonstrate some leadership skills and be an example to newly enlisted Marines. The Army had lance corporals in the 1960s but, currently, the U.S. Marines is the only branch of the armed forces to maintain this rank.

Corporal – In the U.S. Marine Corps, corporal is a junior NCO rank and the fourth rank, above a lance corporal and directly below a sergeant. A corporal has an E-4 paygrade.

Sergeant – In the U.S. Marine Corps, sergeant is a junior NCO rank and the oldest rank in the Marines. Sergeants serve as squad leaders during combat and lead eight soldiers, including at least one corporal. A sergeant has an E-5 paygrade and is above Corporal but below a Staff Sergeant.

Gunnery Sergeant – An NCO who manages fire power and logistics for a company of marines. It is the seventh rank in the Marine Corps, above Staff Sergeant and below Master Sergeant.

Lieutenant – A commissioned officer. In the U.S. Marine Corps, the rank is divided between Second Lieutenant, who is lower-ranking, and First Lieutenant. A first lieutenant ranks below a captain, or skipper.

Lieutenant Colonel – In the U.S. Marine Corps, lieutenant colonel is the second field officer grade commissioned officer rank. Lieutenant Colonels can command anywhere from 300 to 1,000 soldiers, with the assistance of a Major, several junior commissioned officers, and a Command Sergeant Major as the primary advisor. It takes an officer 16 to 22 years to reach this rank, which has the O-5 paygrade. As a result, many officers retire at this paygrade after performing 20 years of active-duty service. Lieutenant Colonel ranks above Major and below Colonel.

Grenadier – A specialized soldier who provides additional fire power, usually by throwing grenades.

Xenophon's Immortals – A group of infantrymen from within the Persian Empire which, in 401 BCE, included Egypt, Georgia, Pakistan, and the Dardanelles (part of modern-day Turkey). The Immortals got their name from the fact that their number was never supposed to be lower than 10,000 standing soldiers. Those who died became too injured to fight, or were too old and were replaced by younger and healthier recruits. The Immortals also guarded the royal palace at Persepolis. **Caputo** mentions them in the context of military historians' comparison of the Chosin campaign in the Korean War with the "march of Xenophon's Immortals." Any Marine, such as **William Campbell**, who claimed to have been at Chosin was regarded with as much respect as one of Xenophon's Immortals might have been.

BOQ – Bachelor Officer Quarters.

KIA – Killed in action.

WIA – Wounded in action.

MLR – Main line of resistance.

LZ – Landing zone.

GSW – Gunshot wound.

Skipper – A nickname for a captain in the Navy or the Marine Corps.

Point Man – The soldier who leads his unit into combat in enemy terrain. The point man has the lowest chance for survival and is the most vulnerable to a sniper's bullet.

Hayako – In the context of **Glen Lemmon** telling **Caputo** to go down to the company area, it means "to hurry." Hayako is a popular Japanese name for girls. One of the Kanji characters chosen to spell the name means "progress," which supports Lemmon's usage of the name as a verb, referring to movement.

Naisson – Military slang for one of the female Japanese servants who does the laundry for soldiers at the BOQ.

Six-by – A big, flat-bed truck used for carrying men and materials. The bed is enclosed on all sides by wooden slats, and is sometimes covered with canvas.

Ao dai – A traditional Vietnamese dress worn by guests at weddings, women who work at shops, and school girls. The dress, which has long sleeves and a high collar, is sometimes worn with trousers. It is very tight-fitting and reveals the contours of a woman's body while covering all of her skin. It is a variation of Chinese dresses, which Vietnamese women adopted and revised in the 1930s.

Sampan – A traditional Chinese boat with large sterns, sharp bows, and a raised deck. They are usually used for sailing, but they can also be rowed with very large oars.

Howitzer – A piece of artillery that is notable for having a barrel, which can sometimes be quite long, that is used to launch projectiles. The howitzer is fired by pulling a lanyard, or a cord. A large howitzer can fire as many as five rounds per minute. It might also have a panoramic telescope to help soldiers sight an enemy target and a fire control quadrant to measure elevation. The cannon is used for long-range targets and is generally lowered when the enemy is close.

Billet – An assignment for housing and lodging.

Willy-peter – A nickname for a bag of white phosphorus—a toxic substance used in munitions.

Immersion Foot – Also called "trench foot," it is a painful disorder of the foot caused by prolonged exposure to cold dampness or as a result of having one's feet immersed for too long in cold water. Immersion foot results in damage to the skin, nerves, and muscle.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in

black and white.

HEROISM AND IDENTITY

In *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo recalls how the United States' political ambitions during the Cold War and the idealism of John F. Kennedy's presidency fostered the belief among teens and young adults that they played a particularly vital role in determining the nation's political future and legacy. That legacy was defined by a commitment to spread democracy throughout the world and stamp out Communism. Caputo reminisces about how he and his fellow marines entered Vietnam in 1965, believing that they were performing a social good. Caputo joined the Marine Corps to find a sense of purpose and identity outside of the conventional comforts of middle-class Middle America. For Caputo, joining the Marines was also a rebellion against his parents' expectations that he would choose a life of ease over challenge and personal sacrifice. However, joining the military didn't allow Caputo to completely divorce himself from the trappings of middle-class America; Caputo's aversions to his cookie-cutter suburb and to the stuffy rituals of military balls indicate his wish to form a heroic, masculine identity that is removed from middle-class comforts and the conventions of the post-World War II era.

Caputo uses his idyllic hometown of Westchester, Illinois as the backdrop against which he recreates his adolescent discontent and sense of purposeless. He contrasts this vision of stagnant, small-town America with exciting historical fantasies of the Midwest in the early days of settlement, which catalyze his quest for adventure and a heroic identity. Caputo's hometown is characterized by "sleek, new schools smelling of fresh plaster and floor wax," supermarkets full of processed foods, and "centrally heated split-levels." The prosperity of post-World War II America created both greater ease but also "dullness," which makes Caputo feel bored and antsy.

To escape this dullness, Caputo frequents the Cook and DuPage County forest preserves, "a belt of virgin woodland." This wild and untouched swath of land contrasts with the artificiality and tidiness of Westchester. Here Caputo can express himself freely; back in his home suburb, he feels pressured to conform to certain tastes and behaviors. In the forests, Caputo also fantasizes about a time "when moccasined [sic] feet trod the forest paths and fur trappers cruised the rivers in bark canoes." This contrasting vision of both indigenous people and European profiteers reveals how Caputo longs to find heroic purpose in the contexts of conquest and colonization. His discovery of "flint arrowheads" then leads him to dream of a "savage, heroic time," which he finds preferable to his contemporary world. The arrowheads reflect Caputo's tendency to define heroism and masculine identity within the context of battle, an attitude that will inform his choice to join the military.

Even when he's in the military, Caputo longs to define himself as a war hero but feels stifled by the formal manners and codes of behavior that young officers are expected to adhere to. Shortly after he is sent to training in Quantico, Virginia, Caputo attends a Marine Corps birthday ball. In keeping with Caputo's nostalgic visions of American life and the military, he fantasizes about raucous soldiers engaged in "beer-swilling camaraderie, something like the gatherings of Beowulf's warriors in the mead hall." His fantasy is rooted in a masculine, Anglo-Saxon tradition in which battle is routine and clannish. Caputo envisions a more brutal world, in which men were driven by instinct and survival—a world far removed from sanitized suburbs and offices. This fantasy contrasts, too, with the ball, which is more akin to a "senior prom at a military academy." Caputo's disappointment results from his inability to divorce himself from the staid world of formalities and good manners, which defined his early suburban life, in favor of more authentic self-expression.

The military ball appears to be something out of the "nineteenth century." He sees "officers [wearing] white gloves and Prussian-blue, Prussian-collared tunics." Some generals wear "capes" and "wives and girl friends [glide] with a rustle of expensive gowns." This image of regality contrasts sharply with Caputo's desire for a more "savage" and "heroic" life and identity, though neither Caputo nor the other marines have yet seen any combat. The gentlemanly behavior among the young male officers reinforces the expectation that they are to conform to codes of behavior. Caputo, meanwhile, seeks to reject this, as this code of conduct is merely a reminder of his upbringing in the suburbs, in which appearances mattered more than the quality of one's lived existence.

Caputo's comparisons of the military ball to "a debutante cotillion" and a "senior prom" also reveal the event as a setting that reinforces gender conformity. The men "in baroque uniforms" and the "fashionably dressed women" are reminders of the gender norms in middle-class white suburbs, like Westchester. This is a setting that reinforces courting rituals, as well as the expectation that young men will find nice young women with whom to settle down. This reality differs from Caputo's fantasy of the mead hall, in which the focus is exclusively on male bonding at the exclusion of women, whom Caputo likely associates with domesticity.

Caputo's naïve belief that the key to his identity formation lies in foreign exploration and battle mirrors the innocent atmosphere of the ball, where the neat orderliness of the soldiers and their companions suggests an unawareness of the violent horror and ultimate dishonor that will characterize experiences of the Vietnam War. Caputo cannot yet envision the mutilated bodies he will later witness on the field. He has no concept at this time of the seediness of Da Nang, where many of these same soldiers at the ball will indulge in vices that they will never speak of if they return home. Caputo's romantic

fantasies of war and traditional heroism are, thus, just as artificial and contrived as the suburbs in which he grew up. The fantasies are representative of the world as he would like it to be, not the world as it actually is.

THE MORALITY OF WAR

In his memoir, Philip Caputo explores the question of when it is justifiable to kill. This question is complicated by the fact that the U.S. Marines initially enter Da Nang, South Vietnam to provide security and defense for the ARVN and are not present to engage in battle. When the role of the Americans quickly changes to that of combat, the shift in expectations leaves everyone with a vague understanding of their purpose, which is further complicated by an inability to distinguish the Viet Cong (VC) from the South Vietnamese, whom the Marines are sent to assist. More troublingly, Caputo begins to question the legitimacy of the United States' intentions in Vietnam. Caputo addresses the morality of war for a soldier who is sent to fight battles that do not seem to have a clear objective or a clear enemy. His purpose in illustrating this moral ambiguity is to define the Vietnam War as both unjust and purposeless, which makes the loss of so many young lives at its expense indefensible.

Caputo reveals the war's murky morality by recounting the ways in which the Marine Corps twists immoral behavior into something good by dehumanizing the enemy. During an inspection tour of Vietnam, General Greene, the Marine Corps commandant, tells a group of marines that their only purpose is to kill VC. Caputo internalizes this understanding of his mission, which causes his relationship to the war to shift from distant to personal. He does not regard the enemy as fellow men but as objects to kill, as though in sport. The rest of his company also adopts this callous attitude, which is aided by their increasing frustration with the "mud, heat, leeches, and clawing thorns," as well as the overwhelming fear of being mortally attacked by a VC from his hiding place. Caputo describes this new mood as "savage," though without the romanticism of his previous vision of Beowulfian savagery. It is an atmosphere in which killing is no longer about defense but instead an attempt to exert emotional control in frustrating circumstances.

When PFC Marsden shoots a VC in the face with his pistol, for example, he registers confusion with his own action. One version of the story is that Marsden "fired in self-defense" when the VC tried to throw a grenade. Another story claims that the enemy was already dead when Marsden shot him. Both narratives protect the legitimacy of Marsden's actions while painting the VC as a necessary object to kill. Regardless of the truth, Marsden's actions seem "perfectly natural" and in keeping with General Greene's orders to kill VC. Thus, Marsden's moral confusion over his behavior is irrelevant in response to the Marine Corps' belief that his actions have fulfilled their desired objective.

When the marines search the body of the VC whom Marsden has shot, Caputo is relieved that "no photographs, no letters or identification" have been found on the man. This allows Caputo and the others to think of him "not as a dead human being…but as a dead enemy." Caputo thinks that, as long as he can objectify the Viet Cong as "enemies" that exist only to be destroyed, he can remain focused on his objective without worrying about taking the life of a fellow man with his own family and social context. This helps the men maintain emotional distance and avoid moral questions over their involvement in the conflict.

When Caputo is put on trial for murdering two VCs, he is forced to come to terms with the moral ambiguity of war. This situation helps him realize that the war is both unjust and entirely purposeless. The Marine Corps brings Caputo and Lance Corporal Crowe up on premeditated murder charges for killing Le Dung and Le Du, two members of the Viet Cong who initially eluded capture by pretending to be students. Caputo finds it ironic that the Marine Corps taught the men to kill but are now "going to court-martial [them] for killing." The absurdity of the situation reveals to Caputo that the Marine Corps is as willing to destroy the lives of its own soldiers to protect its reputation as it is willing to send young men to die with the belief that this sacrifice will minimize the spread of Communism in foreign lands.

Caputo notices that the investigating officer has not "submitted any explanatory or extenuating circumstances" on the form containing the charges against him. Caputo realizes that the war *is* the extenuating circumstance, and that the killings can only be explained within the context of the war. However, if the authorities acknowledge that they sent marines to "a war whose sole aim was to kill Viet Cong, a war in which those ordered to do the killing often could not distinguish the Viet Cong from civilians," then this would "raise a host of ambiguous moral questions," particularly about the "morality of American intervention in Vietnam." Thus, the Marine Corps chooses to portray Caputo and Crowe as soldiers gone awry, acting with their own purpose instead of according to orders.

Despite the shady intentions of the Marine Corps, Caputo cannot help but to acknowledge his complicity with the war's objectives. He realizes that there is "murder in [his] heart" and that this led him to "[transmit] his inner violence to the men." This acknowledgement of the violence within him circles back to his wish at the beginning of the memoir to experience something more "savage." Though the Marine Corps succeeded in training Caputo to express his violent impulses, those impulses were already there—the results of fantasies of an untamed early America as well as Cold War antagonism. By the end of the memoir, Caputo realizes that his personal values are inseparable from the United States' militaristic, political, and economic ambitions and that, to evolve, he will need "to live for [himself] on [his] own terms."

Caputo never resolves the question of when it is justifiable to kill, as it doesn't have a simple answer. Instead, he walks the reader through instances in which he *thought* it was justifiable to kill. In each instance, he acts according to what he thinks are the Marine Corps' wishes. When the institution fails to protect him after he agreed to fulfill its agenda, Caputo's sense of the moral justness of his actions crumbles. He concludes with the wish to live on his own terms because he realizes that there are no fixed truths determining morality. He was misguided in seeking moral purpose from the Marine Corps, whose own intentions in Vietnam remain morally dubious.

LOYALTY AND CAMARADERIE

Beginning with his fantasy of the Marine Corps as they relate to "Beowulf's warriors," Philip Caputo expresses a vision of life in the Marines as one that would reinforce male bonds. Part of this desire is likely due to Caputo's feeling of rootlessness in his youth—belonging neither to Westchester, Illinois nor to collegiate life. The enforced brotherhood between marines, which brings together young men of different races and backgrounds, provides Caputo with connection. This loyalty also explains why many men remained committed to a war effort some knew would be fruitless: they simply could not abandon their comrades-in-arms. The memoir illustrates how loyalty and camaraderie were key to the effort in Vietnam and to Caputo's own well-being.

Caputo observes early in his career how the Marines form a unique bond due to the unique conditions of the war. While Caputo notices that even though the Vietnam War brings out the most beastly traits in some soldiers, it also enforces fraternity and love among men who might have been afraid to demonstrate such emotion in normal circumstances. Caputo goes with Corporal Parker to the division field hospital to visit PFC Esposito. Esposito is seriously ill but "regrets having to leave the battalion and Parker, who has been his buddy since boot camp." Esposito's dismissal of the seriousness of his illness in favor of the well-being of the Marines reveals the extent of his commitment. By downplaying the importance of his own health over that of the organization, he expresses an understanding of himself as less of an individual and more a part of a collective body. Although this ironically goes against the grain of the American value of individualism, it is compatible with the military's enforcement of loyalty to the organization and to other soldiers as imperative to the military's functioning.

Caputo feels slightly embarrassed listening in on the conversation between Parker and Esposito, who seem to him like "two lovers who are about to be separated." Parker's "eyes are damp" and "his voice is cracking with emotion." This display differs from social codes for men at the time, which encouraged them to mask their emotions from each other. Caputo reveals the irony of war, which is a very masculine world, but also one in which expressions of friendship are more intimate because of the heightened levels of danger and trauma involved.

Caputo experiences this kind of intimate friendship for himself with First Lieutenant Walter Neville Levy. Levy is killed in action after trying to save a corpsman, "not knowing that the man was beyond saving." The portrait that Caputo paints of Levy is of a man committed to self-sacrifice, as well as that of a long-lost brother whose qualities complement those of Caputo, while also encouraging him to strive to be a better version of himself. Caputo recalls how he "always liked Levy and sometimes envied him." He reveals the contrasts in their personalities and backgrounds—Caputo is "hot-tempered and impulsive" while Levy is "quietly deliberate"; Levy's family is "well-off" while Caputo's "recently struggled out of the working class." Finally, Levy joins the Marines out of patriotism and has "no personal ambition," while Caputo's reasons are "mostly personal." Caputo portrays Levy as a more mature version of himself, someone who has acquired the better character that Caputo still seeks to attain. Levy joins the Marines not to give himself a sense of identity, but because he perceives it as the right thing to do. Caputo suggests that Levy's loyalty to the institution and its values surpasses his own, for he seems to give himself to the institution without expecting anything in return.

It is this commitment to self-sacrifice which causes Levy's death. Caputo relates Levy's rescue of the dead corpsman to the Marines' commitment never to leave their "wounded on the battlefield," but to bring them "out of danger and into safety, even if [they] had to risk their own lives to do it." This standard expectation is a testament to the Marines' unconditional loyalty to each other, which is both personal, given the relationships that they build with each other, as well as institutional.

DANGER AND UNCERTAINTY

In *A Rumor of War*, Philip Caputo describes both the pleasure and pain of war's many dangers. In relaying his experiences as a lieutenant in the Vietnam War, Caputo depicts the fears that can overwhelm a soldier on the battlefield, as well as the heroic feeling that some soldiers develop in response to their combat roles. Just as Caputo illustrates how war is morally ambiguous, he also shows how the experience of being a soldier can be emotionally ambiguous; for Caputo, the danger and uncertainty of war make it simultaneously terrifying and thrilling.

Much of the fear surrounding war is due to its danger and uncertainty; regardless of having so-called strength in numbers or advanced technological weapons, soldiers are always physically and mentally vulnerable. Because of this "constant and total uncertainty," Caputo and the other soldiers never know what is going to happen, and simply having more soldiers or weapons doesn't alleviate this problem or make them any less vulnerable. These feelings of vulnerability are compounded by the uniqueness of the Vietnam War, in which American

soldiers face, for the first time, an enemy whose main weapons are "the mine and the booby trap." This kind of warfare evokes "peculiar terrors," according to Caputo, in which one is uncertain of their relationship with the ground. This terror complicates the soldiers' relationship with the terrain, which is the place where they eat and sleep but also the place where they fight and must remain ever vigilant of the threat of being blown apart by a mine.

In addition to physical vulnerability, there is the ever-present threat of mental collapse. When one marine—"a veteran of the Battle of Chu Lai and of countless patrol actions since"—begins to cry and roll around in the mud, Sergeant Bain kicks and violently shakes him. Caputo is grateful to the sergeant, who he perceives as beating the "virus" of cowardice and fear out of the marine before it spreads through the rest of the platoon. The inconsolable marine outwardly manifests the fear that everyone else is likely feeling. Sergeant Bain's act does not expel that fear, but it reminds the others to repress it for the sake of completing the mission.

Many soldiers also experience an attraction to danger, as well as a tendency to romanticize battle. Caputo uses himself and Lieutenant Murph McCloy as examples of how soldiers become attracted to danger and how this attraction can cloud, even temporarily, the ugliness of combat. Caputo describes Lieutenant McCloy as a "romantic spirit" with "a shock-proof prism that turned the starkest realities of the war into the colorful stuff of romance." McCloy's personal filter allows him to avoid the sense of horror that others feel at the sight of "mangled, festering corpses." Instead, he sees "only heroes bravely fallen in battle" and "himself as Prince Hal, going once more into the breach." McCloy's mindset helps him to idealize his role so that he can avoid feeling debased by circumstances that would otherwise be viewed as inhumane. He places himself within a classical tradition of warriors, just as Caputo previously related his membership in the Marines to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, to remind himself that there is honor and historical importance to his role.

Caputo, on the other hand, does not romanticize his feelings in battle but concentrates on the more instinctive pleasures, such as "the inner, emotional war" that results from confronting fear by killing "the source of it" after his helicopter goes down. He describes "a tension that is almost sexual in its intensity." In being forced to confront his mortal enemy, he dismantles his feeling of impotence and regains a sense of control, despite being trapped within the helicopter. Caputo describes feelings that swing from a desperate instinct for survival to the raw pleasure of destroying an enemy that has not yet destroyed him. These feelings are related to Caputo's earlier romanticizing of war in that he is eager to vanquish a perceived enemy. They differ, however, in that the enemy is no longer an abstract figure of his imagination but a real fellow being who seeks to kill him. Even though the danger and uncertainty of combat is what makes war so terrifying, these very features are also what buoy Caputo against the enemy.

WAR AND DISILLUSIONMENT

Philip Caputo's increasing anger over the apparent futility of the Vietnam War leads to his eventual disillusionment with the war effort and his purpose there. This disillusionment begins when he is reassigned as an assistant adjutant, or "the officer in charge of the dead" at regimental headquarters. This responsibility forces him to confront for the first time the war's staggering human cost, which affects both sides. When Caputo is next reassigned to his rifle company, he becomes indifferent to death and sees himself within a context of "insect-like pettiness." He concludes that if the deaths of admirable men like Levy, Simpson, and Sullivan make no difference, along with the thousands of people who die each week, then his death would not matter much either. Caputo's expression of disillusionment in his memoir demonstrates how the perpetual shocks of war can result in the loss of all feeling, an event that destroys his humanity and empathy.

Caputo defines himself at one point as a "beetle," who, like the other soldiers, is merely "scratching for survival in the wilderness." This attitude of indifference toward the prospect of death is liberating for Caputo; for, if no great change would result from his demise, then he reasons that he has no need to fear the loss of his life. There is some comfort in imagining himself as a miniscule being of little importance because he knows that he will be replaced, and life and the war would continue without him.

Caputo experiences his existential crisis while marching through the jungle, alongside the Song Tuy Loan, a river in Da Nang. He compares himself to an insect that could be eliminated at any moment, which also relates to the way in which the dense forest of this foreign land overwhelms him—it is a place where leeches "[drop] off of the dripping leaves and [fasten] on [the soldiers'] necks," and where it takes a long time to hack through the bush with their machetes. Caputo's very environment is indifferent to his existence and fosters conditions—blood-sucking insects, overwhelming heat, and disease—that seem to precipitate his demise.

Though Caputo becomes indifferent toward his own well-being, he remains fiercely dedicated to that of his fellow soldiers. As a result, he also becomes increasingly merciless toward the enemy, losing his capacity to empathize even with innocent civilians. When two of his comrades—Corporal Rodella and Corporal Greeley—are seriously wounded during an attack, Caputo destroys half a village in retaliation. However, he notes that he commits this act with no feeling at all and no "sense of vengeance." Caputo's ability to divorce his action from any feeling is also an indication of his disillusionment in response to the war. Caputo has been so conditioned to

destroy life that he can fulfill this function both thoughtlessly and remorselessly.

This coldness, however, does not impact his fidelity to his fellow marines. While carrying Corporal Greeley, whose left arm has just been blown apart, Caputo shares in the wounded marine's anger and "hatred for everything in existence." Caputo's only love, in this instance, is for his fellow marines, whom he deems "better than all the men who had sent them to the war." Here, Caputo expresses his cynicism toward figures of authority, particularly the now deceased John F. Kennedy, who sent the marines to a war in which they seem to suffer for no noble or winnable purpose.

After Caputo secures evacuation for the wounded and prepares his platoon to resume their march, someone discovers "a length of electrical detonating cord lying in the grass near the village." The cord is connected to the mine which has recently exploded, injuring Corporal Greeley and several others. The sight of it prompts Caputo to order rocket launcher teams "to fire white phosphorus shells into the hamlet." He watches half the village go up in flames and listens to people screaming and "running through the white smoke." Caputo's anger at the suffering of his comrades starkly contrasts with his indifference toward the suffering of the Vietnamese civilians. Thus, while he is contemptuous of the war, he continues to fulfill its function in killing as many of the perceived enemy as he can. He performs this act in an automaton-like manner, without regret or empathy.

Throughout the course of his memoir, Caputo goes from being an idealist with a deep admiration for American values and respect for authority to a hardened cynic who blames those in power for the suffering and death that he witnesses (and perpetuates) daily. As a result of the constant sight of corpses and mangled bodies, Caputo grows less affected by the prospect of death and becomes a shell of a person, apathetic about death and even more callous toward the enemy. Caputo thus illustrates how war can kill the human spirit as easily as it does a human body.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

OFFICER IN CHARGE OF THE DEAD

In light of his new position as an assistant adjutant—an administrator whose job it is to report on dead marines and dead Viet Cong—Caputo nicknames himself "Officer in Charge of the Dead," and even makes himself a name plate with the designation out of cardboard. Caputo's self-designated status symbolizes his growing feelings of uselessness in his leadership position and skepticism surrounding the validity of the war's cause and if it's a worthy sacrifice of so many young lives. Caputo finds the reporting demoralizing and is especially dismayed when he is responsible for reporting the deaths of PFC Peter Devlin, Lance Corporal James Bryce, and PFC Lockhart—all men from his former platoon. His morbid work takes on new significance after he has a dream in which he is in command of all of the deceased soldiers from his old platoon. He feels helpless in stopping the imminent deaths, a perspective that contrasts markedly from his previous confidence, which made him believe that the war would end quickly, and that most of the soldiers would return home intact. However, his confrontations with violence, in which he sees how modern weaponry can mutilate a human body, force him to grapple with mortality and question the point of the war.

CAMPAIGN MEDALS AND RIBBONS

Throughout *A Rumor of War*, campaign medals and ribbons symbolize Caputo's evolving concept of heroism and eventual opposition to the war. At the beginning of his military career, Caputo coveted war decorations, considering them the pinnacle of heroism. His subsequent rejection of his war decorations following his enlistment reflects his disenchantment with the war and belief that the war is pointless. In a dramatic gesture of protest, Caputo mails his campaign ribbons to President Richard Nixon in 1970, along with a letter detailing his opposition to the Vietnam War, once again conflating war decorations with his strong antiwar convictions. Instead of feeling proud of his campaign ribbons, Caputo feels a deep sense of dishonor at being associated with a morally objectionable conflict. He also associates war decorations with high-ranking military officers whom he perceives as having less interest in soldier's lives than they do in promotions and other forms of self-glorification.

Elsewhere in the memoir, medals and ribbons point to death and mutilation rather than honor. The river trail beside the Song Tuy Loan is nicknamed "Purple Heart Trail" due to its reputation for seriously wounding two marines from another platoon. The honor, which the military bestows to soldiers who are injured in the line of duty, is inextricable from the sense of dread that it evokes in active-duty soldiers who know that they can be mortally wounded at any moment.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Owl Books edition of *A Rumor of War* published in 1977.

Prologue Quotes

War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to "ask what you can do for your country" and by the missionary idealism he had awakened in us.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: XIV

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo starts his memoir by helping the reader to understand why he chose to enlist in the Marine Corps and go to Vietnam. He describes war in the context of childhood fantasies of heroism, which have nothing to do with the tedious and dangerous day-to-day realities of combat. Caputo also reveals the difference between the early years of the war, in which young people retained trust in their government and its objectives, and the later years of the war, which were characterized by mistrust of government and moral opposition to the Vietnam War's objectives. He mentions Kennedy's famous quote, in which the president called a generation to service, to help the reader understand the depth of the era's innocence and idealism. After Caputo is discharged from the Marines, he realizes that he has lost his innocence, as a result of the brutality that he witnessed in the war. Caputo briefly joins an antiwar movement and writes a memoir in which he describes the cruel nature of war, with the purpose of helping Americans think more carefully about their reasons for entering it.

Chapter One Quotes

A man saw the heights and depths of human behavior in Vietnam, all manner of violence and horrors so grotesque that they evoked more fascination than disgust. Once I had seen pigs eating napalm-charred corpses—a memorable sight, pigs eating roast people.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo recalls the aftermath of his service in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War. The "heights" of human behavior include moments in which he witnessed fellow marines commit acts of heroism, such as Lance Corporal Sampson's rescue of Corporal José Gonzalez after he steps on an antipersonnel mine, and Lieutenant Walter Neville Levy's adherence to the Marine Corps' rule never to leave a marine on the battlefield, sacrificing his own life in the process. The "depths" of human behavior include moments in which the marines exhibit bestial behavior, such as when Hanson tries to cut the ears off of dead Viet Cong soldiers. The diverse "manner of violence and horrors" reveal how creative people can become when aroused to commit violence. In some instances, war reinforces the animal nature of human beings, not only demonstrating how people sometimes behave no better than wild animals, but also how the human body is only conceptually the sacred temple that Caputo had been raised to believe it was. On the battlefield, he sees the human body rendered as nothing more than vulnerable flesh, likely to rot or to become food for other animals. The sight of pigs eating charred corpses demystifies death for Caputo, while also reinforcing the understanding that America's own chemical weapons—napalm, for example—have been instrumental in the destruction of the human life he believes to be sacred. There is a moral conflict between the preservation of freedom, with the assistance of weaponry, and respect for human life.

That is what I wanted, to find in a commonplace world a chance to live heroically. Having known nothing but security, comfort, and peace, I hungered for danger, challenges, and violence [...] the heroic experience I sought was war; war, the ultimate adventure; war, the ordinary man's most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5-6

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo describes how his decision to join the Marine Corps, which would soon deploy him to Vietnam, was a wish to escape from his comfortable and seemingly artificial suburban existence. It was also a wish to cultivate the kind of experiences that he believed would make his life meaningful. The conformity of suburban life gave Caputo fewer opportunities to make his life interesting and worthwhile, he thought. He contrasts his dull early life in Illinois with his fantasy of war, not realizing that he will go to

combat to fight for the very comforts that he claims to despise. His concept of war as an "adventure" overlooks the danger that it presents to his mortality. Caputo's repetition of the word "war" in this paragraph suggests an obsession with it. He has conceptualized war as the means of escape from ordinariness which, during his teen years, strike him as a worse fate than death.

Chapter Five Quotes

❝ We broke up into teams and started the search, which amounted to a disorganized rummaging through the villagers' belongings [...] Most of the huts were empty, but in one we found a young woman nursing an infant whose head was covered in running sores [...] The absolute indifference in her eyes began to irritate me [...] because her passivity seemed to be a denial of our existence, as if we were nothing more to her than a passing wind that had temporarily knocked a few things out of place.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Widener , Sergeant William "Wild Bill" Campbell , Peterson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88-89

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo describes his platoon's search of Hoi-Vuc, a village known to be occupied by Viet Cong guerrillas. The VC are nowhere to be found; instead, the marines find elderly people and a young mother nursing her child. In contrast to these people, the marines seem brutish and unfeeling. They rummage through the villagers' personal belongings like looters. Caputo, due both to his awkwardness and his single-minded focus on proving himself as a marine, misperceives the young mother's gaze as "indifference" and "passivity," though it is more likely helplessness. Her poverty and inability even to treat the "running sores" on her child's head make her incapable of daring to challenge the well-fed foreigners from a wealthy nation whose machinery and power give them dominance.

Despite being the more powerful of the two of them, Caputo feels vulnerable under the woman's gaze. He perceives her lack of a reaction as an unwillingness to acknowledge his presence, not as an inability to contend with his presence. His sense of himself and the other marines as "a passing wind" reveals the cultural difference between him and the young woman: he comes from a nation that demands people take action against adversity, while she comes from a culture that sees suffering as an inherent part of life.

❝ On the way back, I saw an example of the paradoxical kindness-and-cruelty that made Vietnam such a peculiar war. One of our corpsman was treating the infant with skin ulcers [...] At the same time, and only a few yards away, our interpreter, a Vietnamese marine lieutenant, roughly interrogated the woman who had been tending the fire. The lieutenant was yelling at her and waving a pistol in front of her ravaged face [...] This went on for several minutes. Then his voice rose to a hysterical pitch, and holding the forty-five by the barrel, he raised his arms as if to pistol-whip her. I think he would have, but Peterson stepped in and stopped him.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Peterson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

After the search of the hut in the tiny village, Hoi-Vuc, Caputo stops to dip his helmet in the river and pours the cool water over his head to relieve himself from the overwhelming tropical heat and humidity. While doing this, he observes scenes which encompass both the humanity and cruelty that one can experience during a war.

Contrary to what might have been popular belief, it is an American—"[o]ne of our corpsman"—who exhibits tenderness toward "the infant with skin ulcers," whom Caputo had previously encountered during his search of the hut. Caputo's use of the possessive "our" demonstrates that the corpsman embraces the moral values that he and the other marines share. Though they are present to kill the Viet Cong—a task that inevitably leads to the harm of innocents and the destruction of entire villages—Caputo does not think that the soldiers are inhumane. He contrasts this humanitarian image of the corpsman, which is also a projection of Caputo's self-image, with that of the Vietnamese marine lieutenant who threatens the life of a helpless old woman. Caputo here illustrates a point from the prologue, in which he says that the Americans were not exactly the savage villains in the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese, for example, sometimes demonstrated shocking cruelty toward their own people. In instances in which this occurred, it was sometimes an American, such as Peterson, who prevented cruel acts from being meted out. Caputo's purpose with this anecdote is to depict the moral complexity of the Vietnam War, in which heroes and villains

took various forms. Moreover, the pressure of one's circumstances made seemingly normal people capable of both extraordinary acts of cruelty and kindness.

Chapter Six Quotes

Crowds of children and teenage boys run alongside the convoy. Many of the children have distended bellies and ulcerous skin, decades of wisdom in their eyes and four-letter words on their lips [...] The older people of the village remain aloof [...] The whores are the only adults who pay attention to us [...] The girls are pathetic to look at, dressed in Western-style pants and so heavily made up that they look like caricatures of what they are. They make obscene gestures and signal prices with their hands, like traders on the floor of a commodities market.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 107-108

Explanation and Analysis

The soldiers plan a helicopter assault near Hoi-Vuc, a village controlled by the VC. Caputo describes the people whom he observes there. The soldiers are immediately met by crowds of children, as though they are celebrity idols. The children, however, exhibit the signs of living in a country burdened by poverty and a lack of adequate healthcare. They seem less like children than miniature elders, due to their poor health and jaded view of the world. Caputo distinguishes the children and actual elders of the village from the "whores," whose artificiality and sale of their bodies make them seem less human and real. Caputo describes how they imitate what they believe American men would like, by wearing "Western-style pants" and a lot of make-up.

Caputo's encounters with these people, who are direct products of Western rule and intervention in Vietnam, are visual cues that alert the reader to consider the morality of this conflict, and if it will result in any tangible benefit to the Vietnamese people. Caputo is not yet ready to ask himself these questions, so he observes the villagers with both distance and disdain.

Chapter Seven Quotes

Stumbling forward, I almost tripped over the VC [...] An enormous amount of blood had poured out of him and he was lying in it, a crimson puddle in which floated bits of skin and white cartilage. There was nothing on him, no photographs, no letters or identification. That would disappoint the boys at intelligence, but it was fine with me. I wanted this boy to remain anonymous; I wanted to think of him, not as a dead human being, with a name, age, and family, but as a dead enemy.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), PFC "Pappy" White , PFC Marsden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 119-120

Explanation and Analysis

In the aftermath of an operation south of Da Nang, Caputo and the other marines are ordered to search for any remaining guerrillas, as well as enemy corpses. The soldiers find three corpses. Caputo here describes the third. He nearly trips over it, as though it is merely another object in the jungle, obstructing his path and threatening injury. Despite the clear signs of the boy's mortality, Caputo refuses to think of him as a dead person and constructs him, distantly, as "a dead enemy," which renders him more of an object or a lower form of life.

Caputo's need to dehumanize the dead young soldier comes from his inability to reconcile his desire for heroism and triumph in Vietnam with the necessity of killing other people. The act of killing is incompatible with his Catholic upbringing and also, rather frighteningly, reminds him of his own mortality. The young man whose blood is spilling out looks different from Caputo, which makes it easier for Caputo to construct him as an "enemy" instead of a fellow human being, but they are of similar age, are fighting for similar objectives, and may even have lives that look similar off of the battlefield. Caputo wishes to maintain distance from this latter possibility.

One photo showed the VC wearing their motley uniforms and striking heroic poses; another showed one of the guerrillas among his family. There were also several wallet-sized pictures of girl friends or wives. The notes written in the corners of these were probably expressions of love and fidelity, and I wondered if the other side had a system, as we did, for notifying the families of casualties [...] What we had found gave to the enemy the humanity I wished to deny him.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Rivera, PFC Lockhart

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123-124

Explanation and Analysis

As Caputo and the other marines search a base camp for the Viet Cong, they find operations orders as well as keepsakes, such as letters and photos of the Viet Cong soldiers' wives and girlfriends. The sight of the VC "striking heroic poses" indicates that they, like Caputo, are also young men who seek glory and adventure by going to war. This realization makes them seem uncomfortably close to Caputo. The photos and letters from their loved ones reminds him, too, that they have a social context beyond the U.S. Marines' limited construction of them as ideological and mortal enemies. As though to destroy any memory of what he has just seen, Caputo and the other marines set fire to the camp and only hold on to the operations documents, which are compatible with the Marines' construction of the other men as devious opponents to outwit, not as fellow human beings fighting to preserve their lives and values, just like the Americans.

> Before the fire-fight, those marines fit both definition of the word *infantry*, which means either a "body of soldiers equipped for service on foot" or "infants, boys, youths collectively." The difference was that the second definition could no longer be applied to them. Having received that primary sacrament of war, baptism of fire, their boyhoods were behind them [...] We've been under fire, we've shed blood, now we're men [...] some were trying to master their emotions by talking them out; others masked their feelings under a surface toughness.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Peterson , PFC Marsden

Related Themes:

Page Number: 127

Explanation and Analysis

The platoon has finished counting its war dead, as well as those Viet Cong whom they have taken as prisoners, and Peterson is pleased with the results of their operation. In this passage, Caputo distinguishes between the soldiers' identities before the fire-fight and after. Before the event, which Caputo seems to equate with both an initiation ritual ("sacrament of war") and an event similar to that of a phoenix's regeneration ("baptism of fire"), the soldiers are immature and inexperienced. Though everyone has endured the "ritual" that initiates him into manhood, they each have a different manner of coping with its aftermath. Those who are more secure with themselves talk about how the brush with death made them feel, while others choose to pretend that they were not at all impacted. Here, Caputo is describing different modes of coping with trauma, emotional openness and withdrawal, that are applied as often in civilian life as they are on the battlefield.

> The horror lay in the recognition that the body, which is supposed to be the earthly home of an immortal soul, which people spend so much time feeding, conditioning, and beautifying, is in fact only a fragile case stuffed full of disgusting matter [...] The sight of mutilation did more than cause me physical revulsion; it burst the religious myths of my Catholic childhood.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 128

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo and the other marines recall the sight of the VC corpses, whose bodies were blown apart by their weapons. The sight of the corpses' mutilation ruins Caputo's conceptualization of the human body as a sacred entity. He describes his realization as a "horror," for it encompasses feelings of fear, shock, and disgust. The sight of the third corpse's brains is obviously revolting, but it also reveals how fragile and vulnerable the human body is. The human brain is an extraordinary organ that is still a field of mystery, but it is also organic matter that can easily be destroyed or rot in the aftermath of death. The fact that people spend so much time "feeding, conditioning, and beautifying" something that Caputo now sees as "only a fragile case full of disgusting matter" makes him feel, for a moment, the absurdity of human existence. He has less faith now, it seems, in notions of the afterlife and in his previous belief about the precious uniqueness of the human body. This feeling will become more pronounced later when he becomes an assistant adjutant and develops the sense that every corpse that he sees is nearly alike and that each death is unremarkable.

Chapter Eight Quotes

Their flat, steady gazes had the same indifference I had seen in the eyes of the woman whose house I had searched in Hoi-Vuc. It was as if they regarded the obliteration of their village as a natural disaster and, accepting it as part of their lot, felt no more toward us than they might feel toward a flood [...] Americans would have done something: glared angrily, shaken their fists, wept, run away, demanded compensation. These villagers did nothing, and I despised them for it [...] Confronted by disease, bad harvests, and above all by the random violence of endless war, they had acquired a capacity to accept what we would have found unacceptable [...] Their survival demanded this of them. Like the great Annamese Mountains, they endured.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 133-134

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo and the other marines pass through the village and see the locals searching for their belongings. He remarks on how their eyes do not register anger and how they seem rather indifferent to what has happened to them. He describes his initial reaction to their response, which was annoyance with what seemed to be their attitude of indifference. He contrasts the Vietnamese reaction, which accepts suffering as a part of life, with his own American context, which he believes would respond to an attack on their way of life. Caputo recalls despising the Vietnamese for their passivity, which makes it seem as though they deserved what happened to them. Later, he realizes that they were a vulnerable people. What Caputo had initially perceived as indifference and an acceptance of their condition was actually an ability to endure it. The villagers were vulnerable to natural disaster, the violence wrought by colonialism and civil war, and poverty. Unlike Americans, they did not have the resources to address or resist their conditions. Instead, they coped with what occurred and rebuilt in the aftermath. With the wisdom that has come with his age and experience, Caputo is able to amend his previous view, which was derisive of the Vietnamese, and discovers what makes them an admirable people. He compares them now to "the great Annamese Mountains," a mountain range that runs through Laos, Vietnam, and northeastern Cambodia. Their endurance has made them permanent fixtures in their country for centuries, and this will continue to be so long after the Americans leave.

At the same time, I knew I had become less naïve in the way I looked at the men in the battalion. I now knew my early impressions had been based not on reality but on a boyhood diet of war movies and blood-and-guts novels [...] I now realized that some of them were not so decent or good. Many had petty jealousies, hatreds, and prejudices. And an arrogance tempered their ingrained American idealism ("one marine's worth ten of these VC") [...] Rather, I had come to recognize them as fairly ordinary men who sometimes performed extraordinary acts in the stress of combat, acts of bravery as well as cruelty.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Sergeant Colby

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 136-137

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Caputo contrasts his evolving perception of his fellow marines with that of Sergeant Colby. While Colby thinks that young masculinity is very much to blame for the brutality that some American soldiers have senselessly committed during the war, Caputo does not see such acts as a sign of an inherent perversion but as a consequence of war. He has evolved beyond his tendency to view everyone on his side as "good" by default. His more nuanced view is a sign of his developing maturity as well as a result of his observation of the characters of the other men. He realizes that marines are just as flawed as anyone else. However, this does not minimize their ability to commit heroic acts; it merely suggests that heroism can be one aspect of a complex character. Caputo begins to question, too, the notion that American life is more valuable than that of the Vietnamese—an ethnocentric view that is probably less the result of an "ingrained American idealism" than an internalization of the imperialist ideals that have facilitated the war in the first place.

Chapter Nine Quotes

The corps would go on living and functioning without him, but it was aware of having lost something irreplaceable. Later in the war, that sort of feeling became rarer in infantry battalions. Men were killed, evacuated with wounds, or rotated home at a constant rate, then replaced by other men who were killed, evacuated, or rotated in their turn. By that time, a loss only meant a gap in the line that needed filling.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Sergeant

Hugh John "Sully" Sullivan, Lieutenant Glen Lemmon

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo reflects on Sullivan's death, which is immediately felt by Caputo's former comrades in C Company. Though the men try their best to distance themselves from Sullivan's memory so that they will not be emotionally overwhelmed by the loss and its implications for them, they are hurt and miss his presence deeply. In this passage, Caputo observes how the soldiers become increasingly desensitized to death as the war progresses. The swift rotation of soldiers who replace others that have been killed or injured mirrors a rotating machine that produces fresh soldiers to replace those that have exhausted their capacity to perform. Caputo's vision of a kind of war machine makes soldiers seem dispensable. They are increasingly less likely to be regarded as individuals with unique qualities and social contexts, like Sullivan, and more likely to be regarded as easily replaceable parts.

Chapter Ten Quotes

❝ The interesting thing was how the dead looked so much alike. Black men, white men, yellow men, they all looked remarkably the same. Their skin had a tallowlike [sic] texture, making them appear like wax dummies of themselves; the pupils of their eyes were a washed out gray, and their mouths were opened wide, as if death had caught them in the middle of a scream.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 169

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo has started his job as the casualty reporting officer, where he verifies body counts, identifies soldiers, and handles matters related to insurance and burial specifications. The job, which requires Caputo to have a more detached and objective view of death, disabuses him of his association of death with tragic romance. Here, it does not matter how each man died, for every corpse appears the same. Death becomes a great equalizer, collapsing differences in race, for example. Due to the countless bodies that Caputo sees each day, most of whom he does not know, they appear less real for him than the mutilated bodies he witnessed on the field. Even the bodies of Vietnamese soldiers seemed realer to him on the battlefield because he was an active part of the context in which they were killed. Caputo, again, reiterates his perception of his experience in the context of cinema. Here, he regards the bodies as though they were fixtures in a horror film, "caught in the middle of a scream."

Chapter Twelve Quotes

❝ That night, I was given command of a new platoon. They stood in formation in the rain, three ranks deep. I stood front and center, facing them. Devlin, Lockhart, and Bryce were in the first rank, Bryce standing on his one good leg, next to him the faceless Devlin, and then Lockhart with his bruised eye sockets bulging. Sullivan was there, too, and Reasoner and all the others, all of them except me, the officer in charge of the dead. I was the only one alive and whole, and when I commanded [...] they faced right, slung their rifles, and began to march. They marched along, my platoon of crippled corpses, hopping along on the stumps of their legs, swinging the stumps of their arms, keeping perfect time while I counted cadence. I was proud of them, disciplined soldiers to and beyond the end. They stayed in step even in death.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Sergeant Hugh John "Sully" Sullivan, PFC Peter Devlin , PFC Lockhart , Lieutenant Frank Reasoner , Lance Corporal James Bryce

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 199

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo has just had a dream in which he imagines that all of the dead marines he once knew are resurrected and join his new platoon. In his dream, they appear to him as they did when he identified their bodies in his new role as an assistant adjutant in charge of reporting on the war dead. The former soldiers' grotesque and rotting bodies contrast with the liveliness of their movements. The scene that Caputo sets is similar to that of a zombie film, and there is something both macabre and comical about it. However, the morbidity of the scene also reveals the tragedy of good,

disciplined soldiers being wasted in a war that Caputo will soon come to recognize as futile. In the context of the dream, Caputo is also enraptured with his role as a leader, though the dream indicates that his leadership does nothing more than validate his role in sending young men along to early deaths.

Chapter Thirteen Quotes

❝ So much was lost with you, so much talent and intelligence and decency [...] There were others, but you were the first and more: you embodied the best that was in us. You were a part of us, and a part of us died with you, the small part that was still young, that had not grown cynical, grown bitter and old with death. You courage was an example to us [...] You died for the man you tried to save [...] You were faithful. Your country is not. As I write this, eleven years after your death, the country for which you died wishes to forget the war in which you died [...] But there are a few of us who do remember because of the small things that made us love you—your gestures, the words you spoke, and the way you looked. We loved you for what you were and what you stood for.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), First Lieutenant Walter Neville Levy

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 223-224

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Caputo is recalling Levy's death and thinking about all of the qualities they shared in common, as well as the ways in which Caputo hoped to become more like Levy. To emphasize to the reader his deeply felt sense of intimacy with Levy, Caputo launches into the epistolary form, addressing his dead friend directly. The effect on the reader is akin to listening in on an intimate conversation or a letter between dear friends, not unlike Caputo's previous experience of overhearing the emotional conversation between PFC Esposito and Corporal Parker.

Unlike the conversation between Esposito and Parker, Caputo also turns his missive to Levy into a protest against the United States' mission in Vietnam and a critique of its willingness to sacrifice young men like Levy, who were so devoted to the country's values, for an unwinnable war in a region that the United States never understood. Caputo's description of Levy's qualities—his talent, intelligence, decency, courage, and faith—likens him to warriors and knights within the literary tradition, who fought for civilizations that were unworthy of their nobility.

Chapter Fourteen Quotes

❝ I would be deserting them, my friends. That was the real crime a deserter committed: he ran out on his friends. And perhaps that was why, in spite of everything, we fought as hard as we did. We had no other choice. Desertion was unthinkable. Each of us fought for himself and for the men beside him. The only way out of Vietnam, besides death or wounds, was to fight your way out. We fought to live. But it was pleasant to toy with the idea of desertion, to pretend I had a choice.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Captain Neal

Related Themes:

Page Number: 247

Explanation and Analysis

Enjoying a rest-and-relaxation period at Captain Neal's suggestion, Caputo observes some restaurant patrons nearby, French colonials, who eat, converse, and blithely drink wine, even though a war is unfolding nearby. Caputo briefly attempts to mimic their carefree approach to life. He imagines what it would be like if he were to desert the Marines and remain in Saigon, but the thought immediately makes him feel guilty.

Though Caputo has internalized the Marine Corps' motto, *in semper fidelis*, which means that he will always remain loyal to the institution, he does not merely see his comrades-in-arms as fellow marines but as his friends. He is personally attached to them and envisions his desertion as a personal betrayal. He also reasons that they fight as hard as they do on the field because they feel personally responsible for each other's lives. He sees no way out of Vietnam, aside from fighting for one's life or succumbing to death. Thus, there is no real choice because one does not choose to die in battle any more than one chooses to live. Though desertion is technically a choice, for a marine would be exercising his free will in committing this act, Caputo does not envision it as such. For him, life and death can only be decided on the battlefield.

Chapter Fifteen Quotes

I had ceased to fear death because I had ceased to care about it. Certainly, I had no illusions that my death, if it came, would be a sacrifice. It would merely be a death, and not a good one either […] I was a beetle. We were all beetles, scratching for survival in the wilderness. Those who had lost the struggle had not changed anything by dying. The deaths of Levy, Simpson, Sullivan, and the others had not made any difference. Thousands of people died in each week in the war, and the sum of all their deaths did not make any difference. The war went on without them, so it would go on without me. My death would not alter a thing. Walking down the trail, I could not remember having felt an emotion more sublime or liberating than that indifference toward my own death.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Sergeant Hugh John "Sully" Sullivan, First Lieutenant Walter Neville Levy, Adam Simpson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 260-261

Explanation and Analysis

As he walks through the jungle, hacking through the brush and tossing off leeches, Caputo decides that fear of death is futile and convinces himself that he no longer worries about the possibility of dying. He has abandoned, it seems, his fantasies of heroism and now expresses certainty that there would be no particular honor in his demise. Instead of the self-aggrandizing image he had previously cultivated of himself, Caputo now envisions himself as a "beetle," a small and insignificant but rather hearty being. He no longer views himself as important, but this has not diminished his willingness to work hard to carry out the Marines' mission and help his fellow soldiers.

His existential revolution occurs as he imagines the possibility of his own death in relation to those who have already been lost. He sees Levy as someone more honorable than he. He remembers Sullivan, a husband and father, as someone who had more reason to be spared. The war machine failed to take into account the significance of their deaths, so Caputo knows that it would fail to account for his own. He recognizes the absurdity of his existence as a soldier: he is both necessary for the perpetuation of the war but, at the same time, is not really necessary at all. In the event of his death, he would simply be replaced by another soldier.

Chapter Seventeen Quotes

Yet, he is also attracted by the danger, for he knows he can overcome his fear only by facing it. His blind rage then begins to focus on the men who are the source of the danger—and of his fear. It concentrates inside him, and through some chemistry is transformed into a fierce resolve to fight until the danger ceases to exist. But this resolve, which is sometimes called courage, cannot be separated from the fear that has aroused it […] This inner, emotional war produces a tension almost sexual in its intensity. It is too painful to endure for long. All a soldier can think about is the moment when he can escape his impotent confinement and release his tension […] Nothing matters except the final, critical instant when he leaps out into the violent catharsis he both seeks and dreads.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 294

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo is describing his feelings after he and his platoon have savagely set fire to Ha Na, one of the large villages near the Vu Gia River. Caputo knows that he and his platoon have gone too far, but he feels compelled to commit violence in order to overcome his fear of being destroyed by violence. He describes his rage as "blind," for he no longer sees the Viet Cong as fellow human beings, or even as enemies with their own sociopolitical context, but as objects to eliminate. Caputo's goal is to use the Viet Cong as the tools with which he can conquer a fear within himself. His fear is cowardice and a belief that his efforts in Vietnam so far have been futile because he has failed to address the mortal threats that have killed his friends. Caputo describes these feelings impersonally, using the third-person. He remains reluctant to identify himself completely with the emotions that compelled him to commit the ignoble act of burning a village for no logical reason. He also connects his rage to his sexuality, which reinforces the notion of war as an expression of masculinity. This comparison also ironically suggests that war can be an invigorating life force, helping men to express their masculine power, which is both constructive and destructive.

Chapter Eighteen Quotes

I wondered why the investigating officer had not submitted any explanatory or extenuating circumstances. Later, after I had time to think things over, I drew my own conclusion: the explanatory or extenuating circumstance was the war. The killings had occurred in war. They had occurred, moreover, in a war whose sole aim was to kill Viet Cong [...] The deaths of Le Dung and Le Du could not be divorced from the nature and conduct of the war. As I had come to see it, America could not intervene in a people's war without killing some of the people. But to raise those points in explanation or extenuation would be to raise a host of ambiguous moral questions. It could even raise the question of the morality of American intervention in Vietnam [...] If we were found guilty, the Marine Corps' institutional conscience would be clear.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Lieutenant Jim Rader, Le Dung, Le Du , Lance Corporal Crowe

Related Themes:

Page Number: 322-323

Explanation and Analysis

Caputo is looking over the forms detailing the charges against him and notices that the section for "explanatory or extenuating circumstances" is blank. The blank line on the form sets into motion a train of thought about the morality of the war. The Marine Corps sent young men to Vietnam to kill Viet Cong, a group of people who were painted as enemies for no reason other than being Communists. It taught the young men to kill thoughtlessly and instinctively, and now the institution wishes to distance itself from responsibility, though their trained soldiers did what they were told. Caputo subtly describes an inconsistency between the image of morally upright behavior that the Marine Corps promotes at home and the brutal, ruthless behavior that it encourages its soldiers to exact in war zones. Caputo realizes that he and Corporal Crowe's punishment is purely political. Even if they are not sent to prison for murder, the Marine Corps has made the point that it does not approve of the soldiers' behavior. This rebuke contradicts officers' tough rhetoric, consistent dehumanization of the Vietnamese, and encouragement to kill in exchange for trivial prizes such as beer and leisure time.

There was murder in my heart and, in some way, through tone of voice, a gesture, or a stress on *kill* rather than *capture*, I had transmitted my inner violence to the men. They saw in my overly aggressive manner a sanction to vent their own brutal impulses. I lay there remembering the euphoria we had felt afterward, the way we had laughed, and then the sudden awakening to guilt. And yet, I could not conceive of the fact as one of premeditated murder. It had not been committed in a vacuum. It was a direct result of the war. The thing we had done was a result of what the war had done to us.

Related Characters: Philip Caputo (speaker), Lonehill, Lieutenant Jim Rader, Le Dung, Le Du , Lance Corporal Crowe, Allen

Related Themes:

Page Number: 326

Explanation and Analysis

In reflecting on his role in the murders of Le Dung and Le Du, Caputo acknowledges that he wanted Crowe and the other men that he organized to kill the Vietnamese men. Though he did not explicitly order them to be killed, he communicated his desire in other ways. This suggests that, despite his religious upbringing, which encouraged him to value all life, Caputo has adopted an "inner violence" as a result of the war. The war has made him fear constantly for his life. Caputo's ability to conquer this fear, temporarily, by organizing the capture of the guerrillas results in "euphoria." Caputo cannot conceive of his actions as "premeditated murder" because that would suggest a personal interest in killing the men that was separate and distinct from the war. Though he has some personal investment in the plot, due to wanting to avenge the deaths of his friends, those feelings remain inseparable from what occurred during the war.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE

Philip Caputo asserts that his book is not an historical account, but that it is simply about war—what men do during war and what happens to them as a result of war. Caputo goes to Da Nang, Vietnam on March 8, 1965 "as a young infantry officer" with "the 9th Marine Expeditionary Brigade, the first combat unit sent to Indochina." He returns to Vietnam in April 1975 as a newspaper correspondent and witnesses the fall of Saigon. He notes how he was "among the first Americans to fight in Vietnam" and "among the last to be evacuated," a few hours after the North Vietnamese Army enters the capital.

Caputo asserts his work as a memoir. He does not have the historical expertise to contextualize the conflict within history, though he was a part of Vietnam's transformation into a unified Communist state. Caputo experiences the conflict in Vietnam in two different contexts, first as a fighter for its democracy and then a chronicler of its sociopolitical changes. Neither role gives him moral authority, but his firsthand experience helps the reader to envision the impact of the conflict.

War, Caputo writes, is attractive to young men who know nothing about it. He recalls how he was swayed by Kennedy's Camelot and the fallen president's challenge to "ask what you can do for your country." America, at that time, had never lost a war. Like late-eighteenth century French soldiers, Caputo believed that the U.S. was "destined to triumph." He quickly realized how much he and his fellow soldiers had underestimated the skill and determination of the Viet Cong fighters.

Caputo was vulnerable due to both his youth and Kennedy's seductive call to public service. He wanted to be a part of history and believed that he could fulfill a role in helping to spread and maintain democracy throughout the rest of the world. His belief that he could accomplish this reveals a lack of understanding about world affairs as well as an insular upbringing.

Caputo recalls how much of the war was tedious—there were no epic clashes like Gettysburg or D-Day at Normandy. Occasionally, there was "a large-scale search-and-destroy operation" via helicopter, which would be followed by "more of the same hot walking [...] while an invisible enemy shot at [them] from distant tree lines." None of these encounters achieved anything politically. However, they taught the young soldiers lessons about fear, cowardice, courage, suffering, cruelty, and comradeship. Most importantly, they learned about death at an age at which people usually think they are immortal.

Caputo describes how the daily realities of the war contrasted with his fantasies of heroism. Unlike the historical conflicts that he mentions, those he experienced in Vietnam seemed rather pointless in accomplishing the war's political objectives. However, the war was instrumental in teaching its soldiers moral lessons, particularly about the importance of loyalty and how not to take life for granted.

Caputo returns to the United States in early July 1966 and works as the commanding officer of an infantry training company in North Carolina. He is then honorably discharged from the Marines. As happy as he is to escape death in Vietnam, he also feels nostalgic for the war. The civilian world seems alien to him and he begins to think that he belongs more to the world of the battlefield than to civilian life. Caputo soon gets involved in the antiwar movement but leaves when he realizes that he can never hate the war as much as his friends in the movement.

Caputo goes through a period of moral conflict. He despises what the war represents, but he cannot dismiss the effort of those who remain in the country. As a result of what is probably post-traumatic stress disorder, he has difficulties readjusting to the civilian world of which he was once a part. He is both attracted to the excitement of the war and repelled by its threat of death.

What distinguishes Vietnam from other conflicts, Caputo notes, is "its absolute savagery." He uses himself and other young men as examples of how the war aroused "a psychopathic violence in men of seemingly normal impulses." He expresses skepticism at the notion that My Lai was merely the result of racism or the "frontier-heritage" of the American soldier. These theories ignore the barbarous treatment that the Viet Cong and the ARVN inflicted on their own people, as well as crimes committed by the South Koreans and the French during the first Indochina War.

Caputo acknowledges the dishonorable behavior of some American soldiers, but he asserts that overall, Americans were no more or less moral than anyone else involved in the conflict. War and colonialism also brought out savage impulses in other groups due to the inherent brutality of conflict and the tendency to dehumanize the enemy.

This book is not a protest, for Caputo does not believe that it has the ability to change things. Furthermore, it is pointless to protest a war that is now over. He hopes that his memoir can play a role in "[preventing] the next generation from being crucified in the next war," but he is doubtful of even that.

Caputo uses the biblical image of the Crucifixion to emphasize the extreme sacrifice that nations make when they send their youth to fight pointless wars.

CHAPTER ONE

Philip Caputo's first experience of the world outside of the classroom is in a war zone. He trains in Quantico, Virginia, practices what he learned there in the jungles and rice paddies of Da Nang, South Vietnam, then teaches others his combat skills at a training base in North Carolina called Camp Geiger. When his three-year enlistment expires in 1967, he is ignorant "about marriage, mortgages, and building a career." However, Caputo learns all about "the art of killing." He learns how to use every weapon from a knife to a 3.5-inch rocket launcher. Using a two-way radio, he is also able to perform "magical feats of destruction" with jet fighters that release napalm and high-explosive bombs.

Caputo contrasts his specialized knowledge of combat with his ignorance about the practical, mundane aspects of adult life. His purpose is in demonstrating how ill-prepared many young veterans were for adult life, despite performing the serious and morally questionable task of killing to help protect freedom at home and abroad. Caputo is unable to enjoy the aspects of life that he helps to protect because no one has taught him how to access them.

Caputo goes back home feeling older than his father. He returns after having seen "all manner of violence and horrors so grotesque that they evoked more fascination than disgust." He recalls having once seen pigs eating "napalm-charred corpses." It was rather ironic to watch pigs eating roasted people.

Caputo's feeling of old age comes from witnessing aspects of life that force him to confront mortality. The sight of pigs eating corpses reinforces his understanding of the human body as flesh, as vulnerable as that of any other animal.

Caputo joins the Marines in 1960 because he is tired of suburban life in Westchester, Illinois. Westchester is one of the towns that springs up near Chicago "as a result of postwar affluence, VA mortgage loans," and the urge to leave cities in favor of open spaces and more housing options. Caputo recalls the town's "sleek, new schools," "supermarkets full of Wonder Bread and Bird's Eye frozen peas," and rows of "split-levels" that "lined dirtless streets on which nothing ever happened." By the time Caputo is in his late teens, he cannot stand the place.

Caputo characterizes suburban life as a sanitized and overly protected existence. He mentions World War II's role in creating this affluent environment, but he overlooks the sacrifices that the previous generation made to ensure the American concepts of freedom and comfort that Caputo will later go to Vietnam to protect.

The only thing that Caputo likes about his "boyhood surroundings" is the Cook and DuPage County forest preserve, which offers some fishing and small game. Occasionally, Caputo finds "flint arrowheads in the muddy creek bank," reminding him of the region's past—"that savage, heroic time" when the indigenous people trod on the forest paths with their "moccasined feet" and "fur trappers cruised the rivers in bark canoes." This was America before it "became a land of salesmen and shopping centers." Caputo longs for that world—a place where he can live "heroically." He has known "nothing but security, comfort, and peace" but hungers for "danger, challenges, and violence."

The arrowheads are remnants of a period in which America was a rugged land of danger and uncertainty. Caputo longs for this rough-and-tumble atmosphere, though he only knows it through books, TV shows, and films. His concept of danger is as false and sanitized as the suburbs that he claims to despise. His desire to live "heroically" is a wish to live with a sense of moral purpose that goes beyond the postwar pursuits of material comforts and money.


Caputo does not know how to fulfill this ambition for danger and challenge until a Marine recruiting team sets up a stand in the student union at Loyola University. They have displayed a poster of "a trim lieutenant" with an "athletic, slightly cruel-looking" face." He looks "like a cross between an All-American halfback and a Nazi tank commander." Caputo takes a pamphlet and reads about every battle in which the Marines have fought from the Revolutionary War to the Korean War. Caputo realizes that war is the heroic experience that he seeks. He envisions it as "the ordinary man's most convenient means of escaping from the ordinary."

Caputo is looking to fulfill a vague heroic purpose and believes that he has found it when he sees the image of the marine in the poster. The image seems to represent the heroic ideal that he has imagined for himself—a cross between wholesome and ruthlessly tough. Caputo's idea of strength and heroism is rooted in white masculinity and a historical tradition that has valorized Western values and political objectives.

Caputo's other reason for enlisting is feeling that he needs to prove his manhood. During his freshman year at Purdue University, he feels freed from "the confinements of suburban home and family." However, "a slump in the economy" prevents him from finding a job during the summer break. Worse, he is flunking out of school, after having spent the first year drinking too much and attending frat parties. He transfers to the smaller Loyola University in Chicago. At nineteen, he moves back in with his parents, which he hates. He fears that his parents view him as an irresponsible adolescent who still needs their care. He is desperate to demonstrate to them that he is "a man after all, like the steely-eyed figure in the recruiting poster."

Caputo is eager to assert his manhood and thinks that physical action is the means through which he can do that. His first solution is to find a job, thinking that he can prove himself by generating his own income. When this does not work, he looks to the Marine Corps to give him purpose. The image of "the steely-eyed figure" contrasts with Caputo's self-image as a coddled suburban boy. The image of the marine is that of a man with purpose, whereas Caputo struggles to figure out how to give his life meaning and individual purpose.

Caputo joins the Platoon Leaders' Class, which is the Marines' version of ROTC. He is set to attend six weeks of basic training in the summer and then an advanced course in the summer before he graduates from college. In the summer of 1961, Caputo attends Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia. He and the other aspiring lieutenants range in age from nineteen to twenty-one. Those who survive the course will be sent to Vietnam in four years, though most of them currently do not know where Vietnam is. The first six weeks comprise of boot camp at Camp Upshur, which is located deep in the forest. The candidates are "shouted at, kicked, humiliated, and harassed constantly." What Caputo recalls most vividly is the endless hours marching in the hot sun at the command of Sergeant McClellan's voice.

When Caputo decides to join the Marine Corps, his life takes on a structure that it did not have previously. He knows exactly what the next four years of his life will look like, which likely reduced his sense of anxiety about having nothing to do after university. His stark memory of the abuse he experienced at boot camp contrasts with the comfort and coddling he had come to know in the Chicago suburbs. Being under the command of a black staff sergeant also begins to redefine any of Caputo's previous notions, reinforced by his white suburban upbringing, about who occupies positions of authority.

About seventy percent of Caputo's original class makes it through training and graduate in August 1963. Those who pass the initial trial return to Quantico two years later for the even tougher advanced course. Some of the training is familiar—"more close-order drill, bayonet practice, and hand-to-hand combat." Additionally, the marines must run over Hill Trail, a range of seven hills as steep as roller coasters but "ten times as high." They run while "wearing full pack equipment." Dozens of men collapse during these runs, and drill sergeants show them no mercy. An overweight man who lies unconscious against a tree stump is shaken and shouted at. Caputo recalls, too, the "intense indoctrination" that encouraged an undying love for the Marine Corps and the code by which marines are expected to live, particularly "never [leaving] their casualties on the battlefield." They also learn Marine Corps history and acts of heroism.

Caputo undergoes thorough physical and psychological training in his effort to become a "hero." The challenges are key in his transformation into the figure he saw on the recruiter's poster. His lack of sympathy for the overweight man who collapses reflects the "steely-eyed" resolve that he hopes to develop within himself. Caputo sees the overweight man as unfit for the challenge of being in the Marine Corps. Caputo's triumph over those whom he deems weaker reinforces his personal view as exceptional, as well as his belief that the Marine Corps is the space in which he can prove that he is destined for a more extraordinary life.

Caputo finds Basic School rather pleasant compared to Officer Candidate School. There is no more harassment from drill sergeants who now have to call the lieutenants "sir." Living conditions are also "regal." The purpose of the school is to turn the young lieutenants into professionals and to emphasize infantry fundamentals, such as how to take a hill and then defend it. Caputo detests the classroom work and longs for the romance of war, illustrated through books and films. That August, when they are midway through their Basic course, the Gulf of Tonkin resolution passes, setting up the next arena for war in Indochina.

Caputo is impatient to join the arena of war. His classroom studies in the Marine Corps seem to repeat the dull life of a schoolboy—the very thing he was determined to escape when he joined the Marines. Once again, he associates heroism and purpose with physical action and deems learning a passive and relatively unproductive activity. Meanwhile, he remains unaware of the political forces that are slowly shaping his fate in Vietnam.

The senior first lieutenant lectures Caputo and the other junior officers on counterguerrilla operations. The instructor disabuses his students of any sense "that guerilla-fighting [is] something like Indian-fighting" and stresses to them that it is "a highly-specialized art." The officers have to learn "complex tactics with esoteric names" designed "to outwit the wily insurgents." A few of Caputo's classmates become "counterinsurgency cultists," learning everything they can about the subject. Caputo finds it ironic that these "crew-cut, American-looking officers" study the teachings of Mao Tse-tung "as devoutly as the Chairman's disciples in Peking and Hanoi." They are ambitious and think that learning such tactics will make them better at their profession, while Caputo is only interested in the adventure Vietnam may offer.

Caputo still associates the possibility of combat in Vietnam with the "cowboy-and Indian" scenarios that he saw on television and in films when he was growing up. He learns that fighting in Vietnam will be a complex task. Though Caputo finds it ironic that his colleagues are "devoutly" studying the teachings of Mao, from their perspective it is essential to understand the enemy in order to defeat the enemy. Caputo still uses the language of Catholicism to describe his education in war, indicating that, for him, becoming a marine is a kind of religious experience, requiring in devotion and personal sacrifice.

As winter approaches, Caputo attends the Marine Corps birthday ball, which commemorates the Corps' origins in a Philadelphia tavern on November 10, 1775. Caputo goes AWOL from Quantico Naval Hospital, where he is recovering from mononucleosis, to attend the celebration. He imagines something like the gatherings of Beowulf's warriors in the mead hall and is disappointed to discover something more akin to a cotillion, attended by fellow marines and their wives and girlfriends. Still, that night in 1964 holds special significance as a moment of innocence, before the "fear, disfigurement, sudden death, the pain of long separation, [and] widowhood."

The ball represents the Marine Corps' traditions and formalities, which reinforce the image of the soldiers as gentlemen. Caputo is less attracted to this image than he is to that of the war-faring men of Anglo-Saxon tradition, like in Beowulf. The moment of innocence that Caputo describes is not only that of the ball's attendees but also his own; he has no real understanding of the kind of brutality that he will soon encounter. The ball is a reprieve from the brutal duties of a marine.

CHAPTER TWO

Philip Caputo's first command is a rifle platoon in a battalion of the 3rd Marine Division. After graduating from Basic School and taking a month's leave in San Francisco, he joins the platoon of forty men on Okinawa. He recalls a partial list of his men, while the others are "just names without faces or faces without names." Still, Caputo can generalize all of them as "idealistic, insolent, generous, direct, violent, and provincial in the sense that they believed the ground they stood on was now forever a part of the United States simply because they stood on it." They all come from slums, dirt farms, and Appalachian mining towns. Many have never finished high school, and some have no relationship with their fathers.

The marines have absorbed an imperialist sensibility. Though they are in a foreign country, the Marine base is a world that has been constructed for them. Ironically, they convey a sense of power and dominance during their time in Japan, though most of them come from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Marine Corps gives them both economic stability as well as the sense that they finally have the family they lacked growing up.

Caputo arrives on Okinawa in January 1965; the rest of the battalion has been at Camp Schwab since September, waiting for something to happen. To keep themselves busy, they go to nearby Heneko, a town with "a squalid collection of honky-tonks" where the marines "get hustled by the bowlegged bar girls, and drink in the heavy, reckless way of young GIs overseas for the first time." The rest of their time is spent in the routine of garrison life: waking, roll call, exercise, breakfast, working parties in mid-morning and afternoon, drills, dinner, liberty call, taps, and sleep. For Caputo, it is a bleak existence with no resemblance to his romantic fantasies.

Caputo realizes that life in the Marine Corps is not much different from the life of a working-class American in suburbia, which he had hoped to avoid. His life is filled with routine and cheap attempts at diversion. The marines' reckless drinking is the result of their youth and eagerness to express their independence, as well as a coping mechanism for homesickness. Though the base makes life as convenient and familiar as possible, they are still far from what they know.

The company's first sergeant, Fred Wagoner, instructs Caputo on the formalities of the Marine Corps, including signing forms only with black ink. Caputo spends his first few weeks overseas learning such formalities, signing more blank forms with black ink, and drinking coffee with other platoon commanders. He quickly becomes restless. Caputo also feels like an outsider, due to the ranks being filled with enlisted men who went to boot camp together and other lieutenants who graduated from Quantico in the same year. Having done everything together and gone everywhere together, they share the same experiences and hardships and have, thus, developed close comradeship. As a result, Caputo feels like a guest in an exclusive men's club.

Caputo is annoyed by the trivial formalities of the Marine Corps. This instruction also slowly disabuses him of the notion that life in the Marines is mostly about demonstrating toughness and engaging in male bonding rituals. In relation to the male bonding that does take place, Caputo feels that he is not really a part of it, due to his sense that the other men have already formed the unofficial brotherhood of which he longs to be a part. Caputo's earlier wish not to be a conformist is now reversed, for he very much wants to feel that he belongs in the Marines.

Caputo is assigned to One-Three, or the first battalion of the 3rd Marines, for ninety days and, after this time expires, will probably be recalled to the company headquarters to do desk work. However, he learns that this could be postponed or avoided altogether if he successfully demonstrates leadership of the battalion and earns their respect. This would not be easy. The other platoon commanders in Charley Company, including Glen Lemmon, Bruce Tester, and Murph McCloy, have one to two years' of experience, while Caputo has none. As a result, he is nicknamed "boot brown-bar," which is slang for a very fresh second lieutenant.

Caputo has both the opportunity to prove himself, as well as an opportunity to develop closer relationships with the other marines. Still, he feels excluded from the other officers due to his relative lack of experience. His first challenge in the Marine Corps, to prove his leadership is a daunting one because he wants so much to belong to the group, while there is also the pressure to distinguish himself further from them.

Rumors float around about a possible deployment to Vietnam. Delta Company is first sent to Da Nang to furnish internal security for the American compound there. Three weeks go by and nothing happens. Caputo wonders if he will ever see action. In February, the company goes to the Northern Training Area, a jungled and mountainous region, for counter-guerrilla-warfare exercises. Caputo, afraid of making the smallest mistake, initially botches this first test in the field. He gives his platoon confusing orders and nearly gets lost several times in the Okinawan jungles. While the platoon waits to move to the jump-off point, Sergeant Campbell lights the smoking lamp. Seeing him do this, Caputo figures it's fine to have a cigarette and gets bawled out by Campbell in front of the troops for doing something that would surely draw fire in Vietnam.

In his eagerness to prove his preparation, Caputo is unfocused on what he is doing and makes a series of mistakes. He inadvertently reveals his inexperience and is eager to go to Vietnam so that he can gain the experience that he thinks he needs to prove himself the equal of the other marines. During training in Okinawa, he fails to prove himself the leader of more experienced men, like Campbell. Not knowing what kind of leader he wants to be, he tries to mimic Campbell, it seems, and ends up making an error that could prove fatal on the battlefield.

Later, Joe Feeley lectures Caputo about being more competent and assuming leadership from Sergeant Campbell. Looking back, Caputo determines that much of his behavior in Vietnam was determined by this lecture. It instills in him a hunger for praise. Fitness reports describe him as "fearless in the face of an enemy," eager to succeed but impulsive. By the time the battalion leaves for Vietnam, he is ready to die "for a few favorable marks in a fitness report."

Caputo's reputation is key to his identity formation. He wants the other soldiers and his superiors to respect him. To accomplish this, he tries to transform himself into the image of the steely-eyed marine whom he saw on the recruiter's poster: a man whose purpose is to serve the Marine Corps.

When the company completes training and returns to Camp Schwab, they learn the Viet Cong have attacked the American air base at Pleiku, killing or wounding seventy airmen. In retaliation, U.S. planes drop bombs on the North in a campaign called Operation Rolling Thunder. The Pleiku raid revives rumors about "going South." Then, the One-Three battalion is notified that they will go to Da Nang on February 24th. Everyone is enthusiastic, except for Sergeant Campbell, who is ready to retire.

Despite the tragedy that has spurred the need to be deployed to Vietnam, the marines are excited to escape from their routine and engage in real combat, believing that this will make them feel more like soldiers. Campbell, on the other hand, has experienced combat and is not excited for the danger that he knows it will entail, and the risk of never seeing his family again.


The 24th arrives, and the operation to Da Nang is called off. It is then repeatedly postponed through March. Rumor has it that the battalion will remain on Okinawa until April 8th, when it will then sail for the Philippines. The bargirls in Heneko, however, are certain that the GIs will leave, and an article in the island's English-language newspaper reports that sixty prostitutes have migrated from Saigon to Da Nang "in anticipation of a rumored landing of U.S. Marines."

Though the Marine Corps is an organization that conveys the image of the soldiers as polite gentlemen, many of them frequent brothels. The prostitutes likely heard the news from high-ranking officers whose leadership does not deter them from engaging in the vices that they deem necessary to avoid stress or the feelings of loneliness during deployment.

CHAPTER THREE

Glen Lemmon picks up the phone to take a call from Lieutenant Colonel Bain about the impending deployment. Meanwhile, Philip Caputo and Murph McCloy are on the terrace of the Officers' Club, drinking beer and admiring the view of the China Sea. McCloy takes a call from Lemmon and happily announces that they are going to war. Caputo is skeptical after nearly a month of rumors, so he calls Lemmon himself and receives assurance that the news is true. Caputo runs back to his room at BOQ, startling his roommate, Jim Cooney, and begins to pack.

The sense of war as a rumor gives the impression of conflict as a far-off danger. This feeling of war as a distant risk, along with the fact that few of the soldiers have experienced it, makes them incapable of understanding the dangerous reality at hand. They enjoy lives of relative leisure as well as the privilege of living in exotic lands. This will soon contrast sharply with the hostility and discomfort they will experience in Vietnam.

The scene at the battalion area is chaotic. Supplies are being prepared and the air is filled with the sounds of "squawks, bleeps, and static hisses" that come from the radio tests. At 8:00 P.M., Peterson summons his platoon leaders and staff NCOs to the company office for a briefing. He hands out copies of a map and points out to the group where Da Nang is. He says that the Communists have "launched a dry-season offensive in I Corps [a military region] and the Central Highlands and threatened to cut South Vietnam in half." The ARVN are losing a battalion a week, and U.S. bases are in danger of another attack like the one at Pleiku.

Caputo notes how he and the other Marines have little concept of where Da Nang is, even after viewing it on the map. With this, Caputo evokes the prospect of fighting a war not only in a foreign land but in a land that barely exists in his consciousness. What is familiar to Caputo and his fellow marines, however, is the threat of Communism (the crux of the Cold War), and the possibility of a nation being divided in half (reminiscent of the Civil War).

Captain Peterson emphasizes that the battalion is going to provide security and nothing else. Their purpose is to free the ARVNs to fight because it is "their war." When the commanders leave the office, they pass word to their platoons of the impending deployment. A convoy forms shortly thereafter. Riflemen board the assembled six-bys. Sergeant Colby waves good-bye as the convoy begins to move out, as though he is not a part of the mission. He has failed to make it back to the base on time, due to having been with a prostitute.

During this early part of the Vietnam War, the United States has convinced itself that it can intervene by assisting the ARVN without becoming embroiled in the conflict, not thinking that the Viet Cong would eventually retaliate against the U.S. Marines for providing assistance to the South Vietnamese. The Americans' presumed moral superiority conflicts a bit, too, with their conduct abroad, particularly with prostitutes.

Caputo gets into a six-by with Gonzalez's squad. They ride along for an hour or so, sharing "harsh jokes and laughter." They then roll into the air force base and head toward their assigned C-130s. Caputo and his "forty-odd men share space with several large crates and a communications jeep." Some men are so tired that they try to sleep on the crates, while others sleep on the deck of the plane, "using each other as pillows." They endure yet another wait onboard, and there are more rumors of a cancellation. Then, the crew boards, hands out instructions, and prepares the aircraft for take-off. The ride across the China Sea lasts for five hours. Caputo watches James Bryce sleep. His stillness and half-open mouth are "a prefiguration of the death that would be his six months later."

Caputo describes the war preparations as convivial and light. Though these men are headed off to war, their behavior is more akin to that of a group on a field trip. The moment is not nearly as dire as the reader would expect. To balance the marines' light-hearted response with the reality of going to war, Caputo ends the scene by focusing on Bryce, who dies shortly after their deployment. Caputo's foreshadowing of Bryce's death underscores the young soldiers' inability to fully understand the danger that awaits them.

They arrive during a "hot, damp, and cloudy" afternoon. Caputo joins the rest of Charley Company, with Lemmon's platoon on the right, Bruce Tester's on the left, and Caputo's in the center. Some of Lemmon's men are talking excitedly about how their plane had been shot at. News of Three-Nine's landing exposes their humiliation. They charged up the beach, as though preparing for Nazis at Normandy, and were met instead by the mayor of Da Nang and a group of schoolgirls who "placed flowered wreaths" around their necks.

Danger still retains a great deal of allure, despite the battalion's first encounter with it when the Viet Cong shoot at their plane. There remains, too, the desire to portray heroic figures, like their predecessors at Normandy, though the conflict is different and the nature of war in Vietnam will require the soldiers to develop a different idea of heroism.

Charley Company is assigned to the southern sector of the perimeter. The lines of the sector are "anchored on the left on an asphalt road" leading into Da Nang and "on the right with A Company." The MLR is opposite the dirt road and in front of them. The MLR is manned by the ARVN, which they will relieve in a few days. Peterson has told them that the rice paddies and villages to the south are likely to be the point from which the Viet Cong would attack. So, if the VC hit, C Company would be hit first. To protect themselves, the soldiers dig foxholes and fill up sandbags. Caputo applies everything that he has learned at Quantico, including using machine guns to cover the front.

The lines that are drawn to distinguish between safe and dangerous zones seem rather arbitrary. Furthermore, the seemingly placid environment in which the soldiers are in contrasts with the impending danger that Peterson warns them about. Caputo does not yet feel this danger, which is particularly pronounced for his company, but sets to work performing the rituals of setting up an offensive for combat. He believes that his training has prepared him for this conflict.

Vietnam does not look like a war-torn country to Caputo. The "Communist stronghold" from which they are likely to be attacked looks to him like "a tropical park." He watches a group of young girls walk by, wearing silk trousers and "filmy" ao dais. At dusk, having neither heard a shot nor fired one, they create places to sleep for the night. The company also has its first meal since the previous day's breakfast in Okinawa. Everyone is filthy after a day of digging trenches in the mud. They wonder where this war is that they've been hearing so much about. Suddenly, they hear something explode in a nearby paddy field. Things calm down when they find out what happened: a dog had wandered into a minefield and got itself blown up.

Now that the men are in Vietnam and preparing for conflict with the Viet Cong, it still seems as though the war is a rumor that only exists through distant intelligence reports or in the imaginations of the anxious soldiers. At this time, Vietnam remains an exotic and romantic tropical realm where danger looms but, in reality, only takes the form of mundane accidents. The incident with the dog, however, foreshadows the numerous deaths and injuries that Caputo and others will later experience as a result of the mines.

At nightfall, twenty-five percent of the troops set their watch alarms for 4:00 A.M. They all keep their helmets and flak jackets on. Around nine or ten that night, snipers begin to fire on them, and the marines realize that much of this war will occur at night. The bullets seem to come out of nowhere and go nowhere; there are few of them, and no one is hit. The landscape, however, takes on a sinister character, and bushes begin to look like men. Still, the battalion cannot return fire, unless ordered to by a staff NCO or an officer. The mosquitos that swarm the area temporarily pose a bigger problem.

The land takes on a sinister quality at night, due to the imagination's tendency to create danger out of shadows and obscure forms. Worse, the battalion is not allowed to respond to any threat, real or imagined. This creates a fear of being passive victims of the Viet Cong. The soldiers seem to be at war both with the Viet Cong and the environment—when violence is not a threat, there is the persistent irritation caused by mosquitos.

To escape from the torture of the mosquitos, Caputo regularly checks on the platoon lines. He jumps into Guiliumet and Paulson's foxhole. They are nervous after having nearly been hit. Caputo looks out into the darkness and perceives no danger; still, he knows that a sniper is out there somewhere. He climbs out of the hole and continues his rounds. Later, a quick fire-fight breaks out about a thousand yards past their perimeter. They hear the thumping of grenades and mortars, as well as artillery booming in another battle a short distance away. These sounds confirm that there is, indeed, a war on and the Viet Cong are waiting for them.

The experience of war is only sensory because the soldiers do not see the Viet Cong. Instead, they see bullets as the only indicators of the menace that awaits them in the bush, and they feel and hear the "thumping of grenades and mortars" as signs that they're on unstable ground. This new instability is also symbolic of the marine's sense of unease in this new setting.

CHAPTER FOUR

The battalion does not see any action until April 22. In the meantime, the days all blend together. The sun rises at 6:00 A.M., changing color from red to gold to white. The mists in the rice fields evaporate, and the dawn breeze becomes a hot wind. When the wind is up, the soldiers cannot look anywhere without seeing clouds of dust. The dust is so thick that it clings to everything it touches. It covers rifles, the leaves on the trees, and skin. The marines eat and breathe dust. Worse, the heat increases every day and threatens to kill Caputo from heat stroke or, at the very least, to "wring the sweat out of him until he [drops] from exhaustion." The pilots and mechanics escape into the "cool barracks or air-conditioned clubs," but those on the perimeter have to endure it.

Caputo and the other men become accustomed to their new environment, particularly its heat, dust, and the plethora of parasitic insects. The dust and heat are suffocating and life-threatening, underscoring that the soldiers have to be vigilant about protecting their lives from both the Viet Cong and from the harsh environment. There is a contrast between the harsher conditions that the infantrymen must endure and the relative comfort in which the pilots and mechanics exist, suggesting a kind of hierarchy.

When the elements are not working against them, boredom ensues. There is no adventure but only the "deadening routine" of defending the airfield. The marines stand watch at night and spend the day repairing rusted wire, digging fighting holes, and filling sandbags. The routine feels less like war and more like forced labor. The brigade's commanding general, General Karsch comes out to the perimeter often with Colonel Bain. While Caputo admires Bain's ruggedness, as well as the signs of combat on his face, he expresses slight disdain for General Karsch's polite but insincere manner.

Caputo realizes that much of the war involves not fighting, but creating the conditions in which the marines can sustain combat. He is also still seeking role models. Bain is aligned with Caputo's childhood ideal of a "tough guy" soldier, like those from TV and movies, which contrasts with the seemingly artificial expressions of General Karsch. His artificiality may also remind Caputo of the enforced politeness of his own suburban upbringing.


Corporal José Gonzalez becomes the first casualty when he is wounded late in the month. He is leading a wiring detail when he strays into a minefield that was supposed to have been cleared. Gonzalez steps on a small antipersonnel mine, a device which is designed to cripple rather than kill, and it turns his foot "into a mass of bruised and bloody meat." Lance Corporal Sampson clears a path to Gonzalez and carries him out of the field, over his shoulders, and to safety. Sampson is recommended for a Bronze Star for his heroism, and Gonzalez is evacuated to the United States to have his foot amputated and recuperate in the Oakland Naval Hospital.

This is Caputo's first confrontation with both the ugliness of war (in terms of how it can mutilate the human body), as well as the war's potential to bring out the soldiers' noblest traits. Here, Sampson risks his life to rescue Gonzalez; the willingness to risk one's life for their comrades reveals the marines' dedication to their oath not to leave a wounded or dead fellow marine on the field.

The company misses Gonzalez after his departure—not only because of his own wonderful qualities but because he is one of them. Peterson, concerned about low spirits among the marines, encourages the platoon commanders to have a talk with their men. Caputo's men huddle around him "like a football team around a quarterback." Caputo tries to explain "the hard facts about war." When he is finished with his speech, someone asks if Gonzalez will be okay, and Caputo assures him that, except for the amputation, Gonzalez will be fine. Then, there are more casualties.

Gonzalez's absence is deeply felt because the marines regard themselves as a cohesive unit. Thus, when one member leaves, it feels like there's a gaping hole in their group. In talking to his men about the "facts" of war, Caputo still imagines himself in a role—this time, that of a quarterback—because he is still unequipped to speak with authority on a subject that he has not yet experienced.

The Three-Nine suffers the most casualties, but only a few are from enemy action. The rest are caused by heatstroke and accidents, such as accidental discharges and nervous marines shooting other marines by mistake. In one instance, "a prop-driven Skyrider" crash lands on an airstrip. The pilot gets rid of all of his munitions except for "a two-hundred-and-fifty-pounder," which remains in the bomb rack. It explodes, "disintegrating him and his plane and injuring several men nearby." Other causes of casualty include diarrhea, dysentery, malaria, and FUO—fever of unknown origin. The diseases are largely due to the unsanitary living conditions.

The majority of the casualties that the men suffer occur as a result of rather arbitrary incidents. The marines are not only vulnerable to their environment and to their wily enemy, they are also vulnerable to their own weaponry. The incident with the Skyrider reveals the irony of modern warfare: though it is intended to make fighting more convenient and less risky for those involved, it has the equal potential to endanger those who use it.

Though the absence of action makes Caputo and some of the others feel that they are not really combat infantrymen, the mechanics and technicians at the base are grateful for their protection, given the unreliability of the ARVN. Some risk is involved in the small-unit security patrols that the marines run through the villages beyond the MLR, but these really only offer fresh air and exercise. For fun, they go to Da Nang to drink and buy prostitutes. Caputo feels "something of the romantic flavor of Kipling's colonial wars" during this period in Vietnam, as well as the uniqueness of being the only American brigade in the country at this time. Lieutenant Bradley calls these weeks of relative peace the "splendid little war."

Caputo still associates his identity as a marine with the ability to perform in combat. However, having not yet demonstrated that ability, he does not yet feel like a marine. The lack of action makes the marines both restless and more likely to indulge in vices, both to desensitize themselves from the fear and anticipation of going to war and to keep their feelings of loneliness at bay.

Things are less "splendid" for the Vietnamese. One day, two Australian commandos, advisers to an ARVN Ranger group, walk into C Company's area and talk about a fire-fight they were in that morning. The smaller of the two says that their patrol took a "souvenir" off of the body of a dead VC—it is "two brown and bloodstained human ears" strung on a piece of wire. He holds them up like a fisherman displaying a prize-winning trout. Caputo is shocked by the display of such barbarism from a fellow member of the English-speaking world.

Caputo's comparison of the ears to that of "a prize-winning trout" is an indication of the ability to regard the enemy as a lower form of life. Caputo is less surprised by the act than by the fact that it was committed by someone so similar to him. It suggests that he may not come from the more elevated civilization. It also suggests that he, too, could become culpable of such behavior.

Ten days pass with no action. The lovely green landscape becomes monotonous. Then, in the latter half of the month, someone decides that the battalion will begin to approach the Viet Cong. The new strategy is named "aggressive defense," which means that the Americans will share in the fighting, no longer making it "their war." A staff major tells Caputo that he thinks the brigade alone will have the situation "cleaned up in a few months." The U.S. Marines believe in its own mythmaking and assume that the South Asian guerrillas do not stand a chance against them.

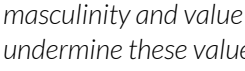
"Aggressive offense" seems to be a method of keeping morale up among the increasingly bored and restless soldiers. At the same time, this radically changes the military policy with the Viet Cong, in favor of direct engagement. Given the more plentiful resources of the U.S., it was inevitable that it would become an American conflict and one that would undermine Americans' notion of being invincible.

Peterson calls the officers and platoon sergeants into a briefing. B Company's brief fight emboldens the staff. They want to organize a two-company search-and-destroy operation in which they are to find and destroy the 807th Battalion, thought to be operating "in the foothills around Hoi-Vuc, a village on the far side of the valley." Delta Company is set "to establish a blocking position near the scene of the previous day's action while Charley Company [makes] a helicopter assault a few miles farther west." The marines expect the VC to flee from C Company, only to be crushed against D Company. Peterson finishes by reading instructions concerning rules of engagement, particularly in light of the accidental killing of a farmer the day before, who was mistaken for a VC. Marines are now not to fire at unarmed Vietnamese, unless they are running away.

The mission overlooks and does not anticipate the Viet Cong's willingness to stand and fight. It also does not anticipate the possibility that the Viet Cong will have its own defensive position. The belief that the Viet Cong will simply "flee" possibly results from stereotypes about Asian men being less tough and capable fighters, especially in response to America's superior fire power. However, the relatively arbitrary nature of the war, in which the marines cannot distinguish between the VC and the civilian population, makes it more difficult to determine one's enemy and, thus, more difficult to justify one's killing.

Caputo is bewildered by this instruction. What if someone has a legitimate reason for running? Peterson's response is that the authorities of the battalion don't care: "if he's dead and Vietnamese, he's VC." The marines spend the next few hours preparing, and everyone is cheerful, except for the platoon sergeants. Campbell in particular is in a somber mood. He is writing a letter to his wife and children, and the deep lines in his face make him look much older. Sergeant Colby insists that they are not "morose." They are instead dismayed to see the company acting as though they are "going on a boy-scout hike." He insists that the other soldiers do not yet understand the mortal danger that they face. Caputo leaves, unable to understand the mood they are in. He is too full of illusions to realize that these men have none.

The order from Peterson presents Caputo's first moral quandary in response to the war. Peterson's response to Caputo's question reveals that the U.S. military draws no true distinction between the Viet Cong and the civilian population. Equally concerning, the young marines can draw no distinction between their fantasy notions of war and the legitimate danger that awaits them. Caputo misses an opportunity to understand why the elder marines are disappointed by the news. He is too focused on proving his masculinity and value through war to consider how war can undermine these values.



CHAPTER FIVE

Widener wakes Caputo up at 4:00 A.M. the next morning. Peterson is lacing his boots. McCloy is shaving at a makeshift washstand outside, with only a flashlight to help him see what he is doing. Lemmon and Tester are wiping the condensation from their weapons. Caputo is nervous about making a stupid mistake when the platoon hits the LZ. He has been entertaining himself with fantasies of his personal heroics, but he also worries about the "coldly practical problems involved in securing a landing zone." He hopes that nothing will happen so that he doesn't make a fool of himself. He wants action, but he also doesn't want it.

There is a great deal of anticipation in the day's preparations for battle. The ritual aspects of shaving and cleaning one's gun, which are efforts to improve one's presentation, seem absurd in the context of possible death, in which it does not matter how well-shaven one is or how clean one's gun is. Caputo also wants to appear as the best possible version of a soldier but continues to worry over his lack of experience.

The marines form helicopter teams of eight men each and gather at "a wide, level place in the saddle between [their] hill [...] and Hill 327." Looking in the opposite direction, they see helicopters taking off from the airfield, around the same time that the marines hear the sound of bombardment—shells explode and re-echo through the mountains. The helicopters arrive when the bombardment lifts. The aircrafts land three at a time and then fly the men who get onboard westward, along the course of the Song Tuy Loan. Widener and the six riflemen on Caputo's team sit stiffly with "their weapons propped upright between their knees." The Tuy Loan narrows until it becomes merely "a thread bordered by galleries of bamboo jungle." This scene gives way to "creased and yellow foothills." The LZ comes up ahead—"a circle of brightness in the gloom of the jungle."

Everything seems exceptionally well-coordinated, and the men sit stoically, awaiting their time to perform. Caputo's description of how they hold their guns "propped upright between their knees" has a phallic connotation, particularly when considering that Caputo and the other marines define their masculinity within the context of being strong, capable soldiers who are willing to kill. The imagery of sleek machinery and uprightness contrasts with the "creased" and mysterious jungle. Caputo's language suggests that the men will never be quite prepared for what awaits there.

The other two squads come in easily, due to there being no enemy fire. No wind blows either, and the air is heavy and wet. The jungle smells "like a damp cellar." The soldiers can hear creatures "slithering and rustling in the underbrush," but they cannot see them, as there are too many vines and trees. Caputo tosses a grenade to clear a way. When the helicopters fly off, the soldiers feel abandoned. Caputo feels utterly American—comfortable with machines but not with the "rank and rotted wilderness."

Ironically, now that he is in the "savage" setting that he coveted in his youth, he longs for helicopters and other machines—signs of civilization and control. The "rank and rotted" smell of the wilderness may be a psychosomatic reaction to the death Caputo anticipates.

The platoon moves cautiously into the village. There are only a few elderly people around—old women chewing betel nut and "a couple of idle old men in white cotton shirts and conical straw hats." The platoons break up into teams and start the search for the VC battalion. They enter huts and rummage through villagers' belongings. The marines have been told that the VC sometimes hide small clips of ammunition in the walls. A young woman sits and watches the marines, while nursing her baby. The indifference in her eyes irritates Caputo. It seems to him like a denial of their existence. Before leaving, Caputo smiles stupidly and makes "a great show of tidying up" to show that American soldiers are not as careless or brutal as the French were. The woman still regards them indifferently.

The presence of no one other than elderly people indicates that there is no clear and present danger to the marines. The relative helplessness of the villagers, which Caputo misconceives as indifference, is contrasted with the force of the soldiers. Caputo is as concerned with the Vietnamese's perceptions of him as he is with that of the other marines. By rummaging through the huts, he and the others seem more like vicious villains than like the heroes Caputo wishes for them to be.

The search of the hut results in nothing. The marines go to lunch, but they prepare themselves to move out again in half an hour. The heat becomes unbearable. Caputo dips his helmet into the river and pours the water over his "throbbing head." On his way back, he sees a corpsman treating an infant with skin ulcers. A few yards away, a Vietnamese marine lieutenant roughly questions a woman and waves a pistol in her face. He raises his arms as though to pistol whip her, suspecting her of being VC, but Peterson stops him. The skipper will not allow the torture of an old woman. The perceived enemy, who looks like "a sack of bones covered by a thin layer of shriveled flesh," shuffles away.

Caputo observes how the conditions created by the war simultaneously inspire both tenderness and inhumanity. Contrary to common expectations, it is the American soldier who shows compassion toward the Vietnamese, while one of their own people demonstrates brutality. Here, Caputo complicates the popular image of brutal Americans who went to war with a relatively helpless country—an image that could be embodied by the thin old woman.

When the marines move out, they cross a "furrowed field outside the village." Suddenly, snipers shoot at them. The plan is for them to patrol a short distance along the south bank. They move about one hundred yards before the snipers start again, "this time with a brief but heavy burst of automatic fire." The marines respond with fire, and Caputo leaps into a trench. Sergeant Campbell orders a cease fire, arguing for more "fire discipline" due to the futility of shooting into the trees. Caputo emerges from the trench and Campbell says, perhaps reproachfully, that he did not know the lieutenant was in there. Peterson then comes over the radio and warns Caputo against using up all of their ammo on a couple of snipers. He then tells them to move out.

The snipers cause a moment of panic within the platoon. Caputo, due to his lack of experience and the fact that his only understanding of war comes from movies and TV, believes that he should immediately respond to fire with fire. Though he outranks Campbell, the more experienced sergeant seems slightly contemptuous of the fact that he must defer to a younger man who knows so little about how to conduct himself and his platoon.

Fifteen minutes later, while crossing a field of rice paddies, the platoon is again "pinned down by a small group of guerrillas." Caputo figures there are three of them, "two with carbines and one with an automatic rifle, probably an AK-47." Caputo spots a VC. He runs over and gets one of the machine guns into action. Caputo is shot at, but the bullet hits a branch about six inches above his head, sending a "severed twig" down on his helmet. Caputo's first reaction is rooted in the illusion that the sniper is trying to kill him out of personal hatred. He then realizes that there is nothing personal about it—he and his enemy are trying to kill each other because that is their job.

Caputo realizes that combat is not personal, though it demands personal sacrifices from its participants. He and the VC guerrillas do not know each other, but they have both been dispatched by their respective states to destroy their perceived enemy in order to preserve the political values that each holds dear. They are willing to sacrifice their health and, possibly, their lives to perform their assigned tasks.

Peterson comes up again on the radio and asks Caputo why he is waving his arms around while the platoon is under fire. Caputo says that he is doing a hand-and-arm signal, like the one he learned at Quantico. Peterson explains that all that will accomplish is getting himself shot. Caputo registers that he understands and realizes that this is the reason why a VC shot at him in the first place. When the fire fight ends, a squad searches the tree line and only finds a "a few spent cartridges." Late that afternoon, C Company meets up with D Company and they fly back to base camp.

There is a disconnect between Caputo's military training and the practice knowledge that he learns on the field. Indeed, it makes no sense at all to wave one's arms around while being shot at, for Caputo is merely inviting the enemy to target him. It seems that the formalities of military training are incompatible with the actual work of conducting a war.

CHAPTER SIX

For the next several weeks, the rifle companies maintain a schedule very similar to that of office or factory workers. Most of the time, nothing happens when they go to combat. When something does occur, it is instantaneous and "without warning." Usually, it is rifle or machine-gun fire or mortars that seem to come out of nowhere. The marines see no heavy fighting. However, they see enough to know what fear looks like, what death smells like, what it feels like to kill, what wounds look like, how to endure pain and inflict it, and they experience the loss of friends. They slowly lose the "boyish awkwardness" they brought with them and become leaner, tougher, and more professional.

The business of conducting war proves to be quite mundane. This routine aspect of life on the battlefield contrasts with spontaneous moments of terror. This tendency to be shocked out of one's routine with life-threatening occurrences point to why some marines, including Caputo, develop post-traumatic stress disorder. The condition of living in constant danger disrupts the sense of security in which they were raised, and alerts them to the world's dangers.

Caputo sees Lemmon's platoon "through the dust, marching heavy-legged beneath a sky that is as bright as a piece of stainless steel." Fire breaks out. Lemmon's men charge into the hills and splash across the rice paddies. They throw grenades into bunkers and tunnels, but the enemy is not there, so the marines march on in the heat and the dust. They are manning an outpost on a hill at the tip of a ridgeline a thousand yards ahead of C Company's lines. On the afternoon of the third day, Caputo talks to Sergeant Gordon about bravery. Gordon describes it, uninspiringly, as the conquest of fear. Caputo is only half-listening; he is thinking about a girl he met in San Francisco five months ago, though it feels as though it has been a hundred years since then.

The image of Lemmon and his men is that of endurance in the face of risks from both the enemy and the environment. However, there is an aspect of excess in their elaborate "charge into the hills," for the enemy is not even there. Thus, they waste a great deal of energy and ammunition for nothing. The scene that Caputo constructs is cinematic and coalesces into his conversation with Gordon about bravery, which seems, in his imagination, to still be a matter of looking tough and capable. This contrasts with Caputo's desire for romance and tenderness.

After nightfall, PFC Buchanan's boredom gives way to terror. He fires several shots at something he has heard moving in front of his position. Caputo yells at him for not throwing a grenade instead. Buchanan stands "in a tense crouch" and refuses to look at the lieutenant or take his finger off of the trigger of his rifle. Then, something does indeed move in the bushes. Caputo takes it for a rock ape. Before Buchanan can fire again, Caputo pulls a pin from a grenade and lobs it into the bush. Buchanan feels better and removes the rifle from his shoulder.

This is one of numerous scenes in which Caputo draws a parallel between darkness and terror. At nightfall, the jungles take on a mysterious quality, causing the soldiers to think that the forests contain something mortally threatening. Caputo's lobbing of the grenade proves to Buchanan that there is nothing to worry about, for the Marines' fire power can outmatch any fear of nature or the VC.

Caputo returns to the command post and goes to sleep. Later, he is startled awake by rifle fire near Lance Corporal Marshall's position. Caputo climbs out of the foxhole and walks down a trail that leads "through the dark avenue of trees." He sees a shadow of what he thinks is a man, but the figure is not moving, and Caputo thinks that his mind is playing tricks on him. Suddenly, he realizes that it *is* a man, who is trying to figure out if Caputo has seen him, too. A marine yells out something that sounds like, "He's over there." Caputo draws his pistol and fires, but the man flees. Marshall reports that he saw a VC running toward the command post. Caputo is still unsure if the figure in the bushes was a man or a VC, but his fear is real enough.

Caputo now exhibits a fear similar to that of PFC Buchanan. Unlike Buchanan, Caputo is not entirely certain that what he sees is real. The shadow of the VC seems almost like a reflection of Caputo's own fear, as well as his persistent pursuit of an enemy that may or may not exist. The imagined existence of the VC is in some ways worse than the reality—g the fear is persistent and creates the sense that the enemy is always lurking and can never truly be destroyed.

Corporal Parker and Caputo go to visit PFC Esposito in the field hospital. Esposito has mixed feelings about going home, particularly about leaving Parker, who has been his friend since boot camp. Esposito is ill and has been heavily drugged. Caputo sees several other wounded men in the tent, including three marines and half a dozen South Vietnamese. Parker and Esposito reminisce, and Caputo is slightly embarrassed to overhear their conversation, which reminds him of that between two lovers. Caputo distracts himself by talking to a corpsman about the injuries suffered by a South Vietnamese soldier, whose injuries will lead to his death in a day or two, as well as that of a marine. The marine is less fortunate, for he will go through the rest of his life as a vegetable.

The portrait of Parker and Esposito reveals how the loyalty and camaraderie between soldiers leads to an intimacy similar to that between spouses—and perhaps even more intimate, for the soldiers have had experiences that require them to protect each other with their lives. Caputo is less comfortable watching the scene between Parker and Esposito than he is with observing fatalities from the war. The reminder of love and its possible loss as a result of death may be more painful for him than visual examples of mortality, in which the sufferers are beyond feeling and have no memory of what happened to them.

Later, Caputo is lying in a ditch with his platoon while a VC fires an AK-47 at them. After two hours, they see the convoy that will take them back to the base camp. Suddenly, Powell begins to stumble around as though he is drunk and falls facedown into the dirt. He has passed out from heatstroke and is "hot, dry, and fish-belly white." Two marines carry him toward the trucks, but Powell wakes up in a rage and tries to strangle the driver. The convoy moves slowly, while Powell shifts "between unconsciousness and frenzy." The navy doctor refuses to treat Powell, which infuriates Caputo. He instead has him evacuated to the United States because his body temperature has risen to a hundred and nine degrees, causing his blood to boil "like water in a kettle." If he survives, he will "probably suffer permanent brain damage."

The incident with Powell offers an extreme and vivid example of how the climate works against the marines and can even become life-threatening. In describing how the other marines tend to Powell after he passes out, Caputo depicts the soldiers' loyalty to each other. Their attention to Powell has caused them to forget about the danger presented by the VC. Caputo's anger at the navy doctor's refusal to treat Powell is another demonstration of loyalty, though one that does not take into account the doctor's limited ability to restore Powell to health.

Alpha Company plans to make a helicopter assault near Hoi-Vuc, a VC-controlled village. As the convoy enters, Caputo witnesses filth and poverty that seems "medieval." Most huts are made of thatch, but some are built of flattened beer cans left behind by Americans. Children and teenage boys with distended bellies and ulcerous skin run alongside the convoy and beg for cigarettes. The older people stare at the convoy indifferently. The prostitutes are the only adults who pay attention to the marines, though they are so heavily made-up that "they look like caricatures of what they are." The VC open fire from a trench across the Song Tuy Loan. Peterson orders Caputo and Lemmon's platoons to form a perimeter around the paddies on their side of the Tuy Loan. There is only one casualty in this firefight—Lance Corporal Stone, who is grazed in the hand.

The plans for a helicopter assault seem rather absurd in a village that has already been devastated by poverty and depression. The older people's stare mimics that of the young mother earlier in the memoir. Once again, this apparent indifference reflects a sense of helplessness in the face of forces—first the French, then the Viet Cong, and now the Americans—that are entirely out of the villagers' control. Lance Corporal Stone's minor injury seems even more trivial alongside Caputo's description of the daily crisis under which the villagers live.

Lieutenant Bruce Tester's men destroy the hamlet near Hoi-Vuc, marked as Giao-Tri on the marine's maps. Caputo recalls that the men seem to go crazy, rushing through the hamlet and throwing phosphorus grenades. Women are screaming, children are crying, and the livestock goes wild. The marines are "letting out high-pitched yells, like the old rebel yell" and continue to throw grenades and fire their rifles. When Caputo hears a woman wailing, he is unsympathetic. He figures that the villagers get what they deserve for aiding the VC. The marines have taught them a lesson, he thinks.

It does not occur to Caputo that perhaps not all of the villagers have aided the VC or that they perhaps met the approach of the VC with the same "indifference" with which they encounter the U.S. Marines. Though Caputo has finally elicited the reaction out of the Vietnamese that he has wanted, when he sends a female villager wailing, he is now indifferent. He seems less interested in the villagers' suffering than he is in evoking a reaction through his actions.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The next operation takes place in a desolate area south of Da Nang and lasts for four days. The marines attempt, yet again, to trap the VC between two rifle companies. They are hit with automatic-weapons fire that nearly kills Peterson. The next morning, C Company is airlifted out to make a helicopter assault in the south. They are airborne for less than ten minutes before they head toward the LZ. A few bullets ring out—enough to make the soldiers worry, due to being trapped in the helicopters. Once on the ground, the men head toward the woods. Tester's platoon is the last to arrive. The VC turn the rifles on the entering aircraft but none are hit. A column forms and marches into the brush. Peterson orders Caputo to halt and head back to the LZ with his men to assault some VC up on the ridge.

It is ironic that the marines scheme to trap the VC between two rifle companies but nearly become trapped themselves in helicopters, which would have made them vulnerable to an assault. The operation seems haphazard, despite the careful planning. On the other hand, the battalion is fortunate; none of their skirmishes result in death. Caputo's description of this operation exemplifies how life and death during battles were often a matter of chance. The soldiers are also much more accustomed now to the sound of gunfire than they were earlier in the memoir, suggesting that they are becoming desensitized to the violence.

Heading back, they cover about a hundred yards when machine guns and grenades begin to fire. Sixty or seventy yards ahead, Lemmon's men move up the ridge. Sergeant Johnson's mortar crew runs out into the middle of the LZ and sets up a tube to hit the VC with mortars. Peterson orders Caputo's and Tester's platoons to move up and sweep around the guerrilla's flank. The bombardment then lifts, and C Company is ordered to move down into the swamp—they are to kill any remaining guerrillas and look for enemy corpses. After fifteen minutes of searching they find their first body. Its brains are spilling out of a giant hole in its head.

The scene is one of action and pursuit. It ends, however, in the relatively uneventful (though gruesome) discovery of the corpse of a VC. Caputo's description of a head with "a giant hole" and brains "spilling out" helps the reader understand the fragility of the human body and the ease with which one of nature's most remarkable organs—the brain—can be blown apart by modern weaponry.

They learn how the VC whose brains were blown out died: the mood of the company had turned savage, and one of the marines, PFC Marsden, shot the man in the face with a pistol. However, there are two versions of the incident: that the VC was already dead when Marsden shot him, or that the marine fired in self-defense after the VC attempted to throw a grenade. Marsden does not seem to know why he shot the man. Either way, they are fulfilling General Greene's command to kill as many VC as possible.

Marsden's alienation from his own action is inexplicable. Either he has become so indoctrinated by the U.S. Marines' message to kill VC that he robotically fulfills the objective, or he had a temporary moment of panic in which he believed that his life was in danger. To Caputo, it does not matter as long as the enemy is being exterminated.

A second corpse is found and, along with PFC White, Caputo finds a third. They see a sliver of blood, "flecked with bits of flesh and intestine" in a patch of brown grass. Caputo draws his pistol and they march through the marsh. The blood trail grows thicker. Caputo stumbles forward and nearly trips over the VC. He is lying on his back with an arm thrown over his chest. His eyes are wide open, staring at a sky he can no longer see. The enemy soldier appears to be about eighteen or nineteen. He has no identification on him and no photographs or letters. Caputo thinks of how this will disappoint those at intelligence, but that the lack of identification makes it easier for Caputo to think of him simply as a "dead enemy" rather than a "dead human."

Caputo's contact with bodily fluids and decaying flesh have little effect on him. He follows the trail of blood like a predator looking for wounded prey. He feels no sense of remorse for the death of someone so young. Instead, he wants to forget that the boy was even a person at all. His need to dehumanize the dead boy as a "dead enemy" comes from a looming sense of guilt that the U.S. Marines are killing off Vietnam's next generation of men. It is also a result of Caputo's concern that he is similarly vulnerable to death, and that his generation may also be destroyed.

The company reaches the base of Hill 270. Marines rush toward a column of smoke, which come from a burning case of papers—the remaining VC destroyed documents before fleeing. The marines stamp out the fire but fail to salvage anything. Caputo assembles the platoon, and the forty men start walking toward the stream bed. While walking alone, Rivera holds up his hand and drops to one knee. He signals for Caputo to approach. He points to a sampan resting atop a platform. There are items beneath the platform, including clips of small-arms ammo. Rivera whispers that a VC soldier cannot be far, if he is around. Caputo tells Rivera that he will organize a fire-team to see what is around the bend. He tells Rivera to keep an eye out for the VC and to shoot him if he shows up.

The VC have fled from the scene, but they have left clues about their presence and what they plan for next. Even still, Caputo and the others are becoming increasingly aware of the fact that they are fighting against a wily enemy. As in this passage, the presence of the Viet Cong is very often felt but seldom seen. They seem always to be in a position just out of sight—in the jungle, for instance, or right around a bend.

Six marines move around the bend while the rest of the platoon waits. Caputo sees the outline of a hut, which sits on poles on a small base camp. The marines move in, looking for trip wires and booby traps. Bits of equipment and documents are scattered around the camp. As the marines sift through them, they find notebooks filled with neat, numbered paragraphs, which appear to be operations orders. Another marine calls out to Caputo; he has found "a small packet of letters and photographs of wives or girlfriends. While the marines look at them, Caputo feels conflicting emotions. These keepsakes give the VC a humanity that Caputo doesn't wish to acknowledge. PFC Lockhart says what many of them are thinking: "They're just like us, lieutenant. It's always the young men who die."

Caputo is disappointed to find the keepsakes, which indicate, that the young men fighting on behalf of the Viet Cong are probably not much different from the U.S. Marines. They, too, have loved ones, as well as lives and identities outside of the war. In contrast, if the soldiers had found the trip wires and booby traps that they were looking for, these discoveries would have confirmed for Caputo that the Viet Cong soldiers are nothing more than dangerous pests that have to be eliminated.

The marines set fire to the camp, then they run into Sergeant Loker. The sergeant reminds Caputo that Peterson does not want the marines to burn down any more villages. Caputo corrects him and says that it is a base camp and not a village; Loker shrugs. He then tells Caputo about how he found a marine named Hanson trying to cut the ears off of dead VC. He figures that Hanson got the idea to take ears as souvenirs from the Australian soldiers who did the same thing. Caputo compares PFC Marsden's act, which he finds understandable, to that of Hanson, which makes no sense to him at all.

Caputo can draw a distinction between Hanson's action and that of Marsden, which may have been the result of the latter's fear for his life. However, both scenarios are the consequences of the war and of messages from high-ranking officers that encourage the younger and impressionable men fighting on the battlefield to associate their self-worth as soldiers with their ability to kill the Viet Cong with little prejudice.

By counting arms and legs and dividing by four, the marines estimate that eight VC were killed. Caputo gives Peterson a report of their excursion to the VC base camp and hands him the documents he found, much to Peterson's pleasure. Peterson then orders the platoon to set up a post on a hill at the western edge of the marsh, where they are ordered to look out for A Company. They have captured five prisoners in a fire-fight near Hoi-Vuc. Caputo's platoon is exhausted by the time it reaches the top of the three-hundred-foot hill. Caputo becomes aware of the difference in them: they have taken part in their first fire-fight and have seen violent death for the first time. Their boyhoods are now behind them. Having shed blood, they are now men.

The operation has resulted in eight dead VC and five taken for prisoner. The men's exhaustion is both physical and mental. Their climb to the top of a hill is also symbolic of their reaching the pinnacle of their moral awareness of what soldiering entails. Caputo's equation of the shedding of blood with entering manhood references tribal scarification and other initiation rituals in which a boy cannot reach manhood without proving his fearlessness.

The marines remain in shock at the mutilation that modern weapons can cause. They are all accustomed to seeing human bodies intact in coffins. There is recognition now in the human body, supposedly "the earthly home of an immortal soul," as "only a fragile case stuffed full of disgusting matter." For Caputo, the sight of mutilation causes him to lose faith in the Catholic narratives of his childhood.

War reveals the ugliness of death. It illustrates to the young and naïve men that their bodies are vulnerable and fragile. This realistic vision of the body as nothing more than physical matter reduces their sense of immortality, fostered both by their youth and their respective religious upbringings.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A thick fog rolls in around 2:00 A.M., the time at which the VC usually attacks. Blinded by the fog, the marines rely on their hearing. They hear drumming in the distance, which concerns them. The last two days of the operation are the same as the first: hours of boring walks interrupted by brief skirmishes with hidden snipers. On the afternoon of the fourth day, they pass through Giao-Tri. A few villagers are still there, searching for belongings among their burned homes. Their gazes remain flat and steady, registering the same indifference Caputo witnessed on the first day he entered the hamlet. He compares them to Americans who, he imagines, would do something about the destruction of their village. Caputo despises the villagers for their indifference and acceptance. Only later does he realize that their constant confrontations with disaster makes them able to endure what Americans would consider insufferable.

Caputo has expected to observe some change in the villagers, after burning down their village. Again, he perceives their reaction as "indifference and acceptance," though it may be more akin to helplessness and a sense of futility about the prospect of resisting the Marines. He forms the Vietnamese in his mind as passive types, whereas he envisions Americans as active. In this regard, Caputo can convince himself that, in a way, the Vietnamese villagers deserve what is happening to them because they lack the will to challenge their circumstances. This view can help Caputo and the other marines feel less guilty about what the villagers are going through.

In the early evening, the marines reach a dirt road that runs past the "French fort," an old French-Moroccan garrison that the Viet Minh supposedly wiped out in the early fifties. Caputo and the others see a line of peasant girls pass by, hurrying back to their village before curfew. The "rules of engagement" say that Vietnamese caught outside after dark are considered VC and must either be shot or captured. The convoy arrives shortly afterward and the marines mount trucks, happy to have a lift. Caputo rides with Corporal Mixon's squad and a machine-gun team. The convoy stops in the bulldozed field that serves as an assembly area for companies. Gunnery Sergeant Marquand orders the men to get off the trucks and fall in line.

There are remnants of French colonialism throughout the country. The shells of the former empire's presence in fail to register with the soldiers as a warning of the ultimate futility of the American presence in the region. The "rules of engagement" have constructed any Vietnamese person as a potential enemy. Caputo contrasts the message from his authorities with the peasant girls' seemingly harmless presence. In Vietnam, it seems that anyone is a potential threat, despite the expectation that a girl would be excluded from combat.

Caputo examines the marines and realizes that many of them are "not so decent or good." He has not become critical of them, knowing that he is in no position to criticize. Rather, he sees them as ordinary men who sometimes perform extraordinary acts. They are capable of bravery as well as cruelty. Sergeant Colby has a different view, believing that a nineteen- year-old American boy is one of the world's most brutal creatures. Caputo refuses to believe this, as he has shared too much with them to have such a negative view of them.

Caputo develops a more morally complex view of his fellow comrades. In witnessing their expressions of kindness and cruelty, he learns that people are complex. On the other hand, Colby thinks that a young man is more inclined to brutality. Colby likely develops this view from the fact that the young marines channel their youthful vitality and sexual energy into violence, as well as the fact that they feel pressure to conform.

Officers and platoon sergeants go to headquarters the next morning for the captain's daily briefing. First Sergeant Wagoner announces that ten percent of the battalion would be allowed "Cinderella liberty" in Da Nang, so called because it will end at midnight. Liberty call sounds that afternoon, and twenty-five enlisted men from C Company go to Da Nang in trucks. Caputo, McCloy, Peterson, and Sergeant Loker drive in the captain's jeep. It is their job to ensure that the troops stay out of "serious trouble." Caputo observes that Da Nang is "teeming with refugees from the countryside, armed soldiers in battle dress, whores, pimps, camp followers, and black marketeers." There are thatched huts "clustered in dense squalor," as well as shacks with rusted, sheet-metal roofs. Lance Corporal Reed stops in front of a row of bars with tacky names, and the convoy behind them also comes to a halt.

During their free time the soldiers are allowed to interact with the locals and indulge in personal vices. Caputo describes Da Nang as a seedy place full of desperate people. The American presence is doing nothing to address the crime, poverty, and hunger that plague the local people. Instead, the soldiers are unwittingly capitalizing off of that poverty and desperation for their own entertainment. The refugees have been driven out of their homes due to the escalation of the war.

After six weeks of combat operations, the marines are excited to be released into bars where dark-haired prostitutes coo at the boys to buy them drinks. Outside, cyclo-drivers pimp on street corners, old women peddle black market cigarettes or cheaply made jackets with sayings like *I've Served My Time in Hell* sewn on the backs. Every now and again, a maimed Vietnamese veteran would hold out "a faded fatigue cap" and beg for change. Caputo gives a few coins to one of the beggars. Then, "a mob of small boys with very old eyes" accosts him, McCloy, and Loker. When the marines do not give them money, the children demand cigarettes. When the men still refuse, the children follow them and call them "cheap Charlie."

The poverty of local women pressures them to sell sex to soldiers who seek local women as diversions. The marines are excited to see women after weeks of being without any female presence. Their sexual needs force them to overlook their complicity in an immoral situation in which they are preying on the desperation of poor Vietnamese women. Worse, the war and the American presence are not rescuing the country from a desperate future; instead, the war seems to be exacerbating the desperation by corrupting the next generation. The maimed South Vietnamese veteran is a symbol of his country's inability to stabilize itself.


The marines make their way to Simone's, a bar named after its French-Cambodian-Thai owner. Loker starts talking to Simone right away and is taken with her, though he has no intention of taking her back home with him. McCloy then introduces Caputo to two girls from Simone's "stable." They are "plump, pleasant, and reasonable" women named Yum-Yum and Yip-Yap. Caputo is shy, however, about whoremongering in front of his soldiers. Marshall and Morrisson invite him over for a drink. Marshall bores Caputo with his car obsession and Caputo tires, too, of listening to Morrisson's hare-brained military scheme. Caputo manages to get away from them and leaves the bar with McCloy.

The interaction between Simone and Loker reveals the mutually exploitative relationship between the locals and the soldiers. Though Simone is not Vietnamese, she is a product of French colonialism in Indochina and understands how freely Western men exchange money for sexual favors. However, she also sees a Western man as key to her passage out of Vietnam, due to her inability to afford to make her own way to the West. Loker knows that he has an advantage over Simone and can use her desire for escape to get what he wants.

McCloy takes Caputo to a Vietnamese restaurant and then to a brothel. The prostitutes are half-naked and bored. In one corner, he spies a bony woman of "indeterminable age," lying on her back and staring at the ceiling "with opium-glazed eyes." One of the women stands and shuffles toward them. Her mouth is smeared with lipstick and red circles of blush are painted "on her sallow cheeks." She offers to perform sexual favors, but Caputo tells McCloy that he wants to leave. Just then, three marines from C Company come down the stairs laughing and tucking their shirts into their trousers. They stop when they see the officers. Caputo is embarrassed, but McCloy quickly covers for them, saying that he and Caputo were coming around to make sure the men are using condoms. The men assure him that they have. McCloy tells them to carry on, then he and Caputo leave.

The women in the brothel exhibit a world weariness that Caputo finds shocking. One is addicted to drugs, and another has made herself up in what seems to be a caricature of femininity. He wants to leave because these women offer no illusions of wanting to sleep with the marines. Their desperation reminds him of the tragic circumstances which led to their prostitution, circumstances that disrupt his sexual fantasies. At the same time, Caputo is ashamed to be in the brothel—not because of his exploitation of the women, but because he does not want the other marines to know that he is engaging in activity which clashes with his self-image as a marine.

McCloy and Caputo next go to the Blue Dahlia, a hangout for Australian advisers stationed in Da Nang. The Australians are "champion drinkers." In the spirit of their alliance, the Australians pour McCloy and Caputo tumblers full of whiskey. Caputo later wakes up in the bedroom of one of the Chinese bargirls. He does not remember how he got there, and his uniform is strewn on the floor. The bargirl is lying naked beside him and offers to have sex with him in exchange for "four thousand piasters," which is about thirty dollars. Caputo accepts the offer. When they finish, she walks him back across the street to the Blue Dahlia. An Australian warrant officer asks how she was. The young woman's name is Lang. Caputo says that she was "fine, but expensive." The Australian commiserates and says that the girls in the Blue Dahlia are "spoiled."

Whereas Caputo initially registers some shame about going to brothels and engaging in vices that clash with his self-image as a stoic and morally upright soldier, the Australians at Blue Dahlia happily imbibe in both alcohol and prostitutes and encourage the Americans to do the same. These men seem to accept cheap liquor and prostitutes as the perks of going to war in an impoverished country. They are shameless about their indulgences and exploitative tendencies and Caputo, being very impressionable, absorbs this view. Though he earlier criticized prostitutes for marketing themselves, he now decides that he has the right to determine how much value a woman's body has.

Suddenly, there is pounding on the door. It is the MPs. The Australians order Caputo and McCloy to hide under a couch, as the bar is off-limits to Americans after a certain hour. The MPs search the room for a few minutes, then they leave. Caputo and McCloy thank the Australians for their hospitality and leave as well. They walk to the Grand Hotel where Peterson and Loker are drinking rum on the veranda with a Norwegian merchant sailor. Peterson is drunk. Caputo buys a round of drinks, then the Norwegian buys another. Then, MPs arrive and arrest all of the marines. Lance Corporal Reed is summoned to get the men and they are released. Everyone suffers from crippling hangovers the next day. Three days later, half of the liberty day celebrants find out that they have venereal disease and go to the aid station to get shots of penicillin.

The scenario that Caputo narrates is comical but also reveals the hypocrisy of the American military, which is well aware of the fact that service members at all levels go to bars and brothels but punishes them for engaging in this activity so that the military can retain its image as a morally upright institution. The contraction of venereal disease, which is rampant in brothels due to the prostitutes having limited access to healthcare, is embarrassing but also a warning about the possible consequences of the soldiers' indulgences and false confidence in their invincibility.

These are Caputo's memories of his last two weeks with this battalion. Once, he leads a platoon-sized patrol near Charlie Ridge. They hack their way through bamboo and elephant grass ten feet high. When they enter a swamp, Corporal Mixon falls into quicksand and is pulled out covered in mud and leeches. The eight-hundred-foot ridge requires the men to climb hand over hand, clutching at the roots of mahogany trees. Sometimes, someone falls and sends those behind him toppling backward. When they finally reach the crest, Caputo sees that they have only covered a little over half a mile. A few days later, Lemmon is wounded in an operation. A VC tosses a grenade at him, which bounces off of Lemmon's chest, lands at his feet, then rolls into a hollow, where it explodes. Fragments strike Lemmon in the face and nearly knock over Sullivan, who is behind him.

The final two weeks are filled with physical exertion and near brushes with death. When the enemy is not a threat, the environment is. Caputo describes physical labors that are reminiscent of the challenges that heroes of antiquity, such as Odysseus, endured in exotic lands. Lemmon's chance brush with a grenade causes simultaneous worries of death, castration, and dismemberment, as it bounces along his body. His escape from all three fates reveals, yet again, how one's survival during a war is only a matter of chance. Sullivan, for example, escapes death this time but will not be so lucky later.

The platoon rushes into the camp and finds no one, although they do find uniforms, equipment, and AK-47s. They destroy the weapons and gear, then they set fire to the camp. Lemmon escapes with minor scratches. Sullivan, who is now a sergeant and the father of a two-year-old boy, is left shaken. Lemmon, too, is traumatized, because he saw the VC throw the grenade at him. He confides that he initially thought he was going to die. When the grenade rolled between his legs, he thought it would castrate him. Then, he just watched it roll away and go off.

Both Sullivan and Lemmon have been confronted with their mortality. Sullivan worries about the possibility of never seeing his son again, and Lemmon will likely be haunted by the face of the man who tried to kill him. Though their brushes with death were instantaneous, for Lemmon, it will have the life-long effect of forcing him to remember the single moment in which his life may have ended or changed forever.

D Company, which covers C Company's left flank, runs into trouble later in the day. They are shelled in a place that is appropriately named Mortar Valley. Six men are seriously wounded. In revenge, they kill five VC, including a North Vietnamese political officer. Caputo's platoon is sent off on an all-night ambush, which is a miserable experience—not for its violence, but for the endless bites the men endure from ants and mosquitos. No one sleeps that night. When the men return to the battalion's lines the next day, they hear that they are to leave in September and return to Okinawa. Some believe the rumor, buoyed by optimistic reports from higher headquarters or reports in *Stars and Stripes*. Caputo writes a letter home, expressing confidence that the VC are losing the war.

Caputo and the other marines are simultaneously inundated with the constant threat of shelling as well as the persistent nuisance of parasitic insects. Though the latter issue is mundane, it deprives the men of much needed sleep. They are increasingly eager to finish up in Vietnam and go home, which makes them vulnerable to believing rumors that the conflict will soon come to an end. Caputo, not understanding the Vietnamese's lengthy history of resistance in the face of foreign powers, believes the reports.

At the end of May, Caputo receives orders from his parent unit, Regimental Headquarters Company. After a week-long course in Yokosuka, Japan, he will be an administrative officer on his staff. Caputo does not want to leave the One-Three battalion and hates the idea of becoming nothing more than a clerk. He tries to get his assignment changed but to no avail. Lemmon, however, cannot understand Caputo's disappointment. He envies Caputo's ability to escape from the war front. Caputo packs his bag and says goodbye to the platoon. Campbell is the sorriest to see Caputo go, for he will now have to serve as both the platoon commander and the platoon sergeant.

Caputo's sense of loyalty to his battalion and his attachments to the other men make him feel guilty about leaving them to fight the war while he will assume a relatively easy job. Furthermore, working as a clerk does not align with his image as a hero in the style of the cinematic soldiers and warriors he sought to mimic when he entered the Marines.

CHAPTER NINE

Second Lieutenant Philip Caputo returns from Japan on June 15th and is picked up at the airfield by Lance Corporal Kazmarack. It is a rainy day. Caputo flinches from the sound of an eight-inch howitzer firing a round. Though Caputo knows that the sound is outgoing, the noise is remarkable. Kazmarack warns him that he will be hearing the noise all night. Caputo does not feel bad about being back, for he had been lonely in Japan. He feels more at home in Vietnam with his regiment.

Caputo's sense of identity is linked now to the U.S. Marines, and he feels incomplete without the presence of the other members of the institution. At the same time, though Caputo has experienced battles and is accustomed to the sounds of shelling and gun-fire, he remains in awe at the power of some modern weaponry.

Caputo reports to his new boss, Captain Anderson. Anderson welcomes Caputo and tells him that he can take the rest of the day off to get settled in. He is to report by 7:30 A.M. the next morning. Lieutenant Schwartz shows Caputo his cot in the junior officers' billets. Caputo's tent is filthy. Outside, a trench offers shelter in case of a shelling or a fighting position in case of a spontaneous attack. However, a foot of water lies in the trench. In the afternoon, Caputo rides up to Hill 268 to pick up some personal gear he left behind. He senses that something has occurred. His old friends, including Lemmon and McCloy, seem distant from him. Tester asks him about his weekend in Japan, and Caputo talks about how he spent a weekend in Tokyo with a half-Russian, half-Japanese bar girl. Then, they tell him that Sullivan is dead.

Caputo performs the mundane chores that are required of him to settle in to his new battalion, though he still remains attached to the old one. When he returns to see his former comrades, he worries that they have already detached themselves from him. He hopes that by talking about his experience with the bar girl, he can find a way to re-establish his bond with them. When he hears about Sullivan's death, particularly after having just witnessed Sullivan's previous brush with death during a grenade attack, Caputo is reminded of the dangers of the war front.

Caputo asks Lemmon when Sullivan was killed. He tells Caputo that Sullivan was shot and killed by a sniper a few days after Caputo left. Caputo does not believe that his presence would have made any difference, but he still feels as though he should have been there with them.

Caputo feels guilty for having been in Japan. He knows that he could not have protected Sullivan, but it seems unfair to him that Sullivan, a father and a husband, should have died while Caputo was granted an unwanted reprieve.

Caputo's friends also tell him about a battalion-sized operation that three companies went out on, in which a marine named Ingram got shot and crippled as a result. They fired a willy-peter round at the sniper. A couple of gunships saw this and probably mistook it for them marking a target for an air strike. Shortly thereafter, Lemmon's radio man had his arm shot off. Still, the crew made it into a village to rescue civilians, particularly women and children whom they heard crying. At the same time, the marines were rocketed by friendly fire. Evacuating casualties from the LZ presented another problem because it was under heavy enemy machine-gun fire, making it impossible for the medevac helicopters to land. Gallardo waved the helicopters in with hand signals until they landed, and the casualties were loaded inside.

The other marines describe the chaos that Caputo missed out on during his training in Japan. Though the men endured numerous casualties, including the dismemberment of some marines, they still managed to rescue civilians from danger. Their ability to do this, despite being under fire from both the Viet Cong and their own military, reveals how the marines were able to summon up extraordinary strength in nearly insurmountable circumstances. Gallardo, too, risked his life to ensure that injured parties could be safely airlifted out of the region.

Lemmon recalls Peterson being shaken by the sight of Sullivan's body, with "a bad hole" in the side of his chest. The bullet turned the man's insides into pulp. Peterson, Lemmon says, just turned and looked away so as not to have to look at the fallen soldier. Caputo sees Sergeant Colby, who again mentions what happened to Sullivan. Caputo asks if Colby made every marine look at Sullivan's body, as he said he would to help them better understand the seriousness of war. Colby responds, "Of course not, sir."

Peterson was "shaken," not only by the revolting sight of Sullivan's wound but also by the fact that this happened to someone so close to him. To avoid being too impacted by the incident, he turns away. His action is not a denial of Sullivan's death but an expression of a need to move on from it. Colby decides against his "lesson," knowing that the other marines already understand.

Caputo wonders why a decent guy like Sullivan had to get killed. Caputo still suffers, too, from the illusion that there is a good way to die in a war, and that Sullivan did not even receive that honor. For the first time, Caputo fears death. He thinks that he could also be a corpse, lying with his mouth open and his eyes staring blankly into nothing. He understands, too, why Lemmon and the others were so distant during his visit. It had nothing to do with him but with their detachment as a result of living with the constant presence of death. As a result of losing their first man in battle, they lose their youthful confidence in their own immortality. As Lieutenant Bradley put it later that evening, "the splendid little war is over."

Death can occur at any moment, and this realization awakens Caputo to his own vulnerability. The other marines treat their relationships with each other as ephemeral, for they cannot know how much more time they will share with anyone. As casualties increase, the soldiers realize that the war will not be the brief and simple affair they had expected. Not only are more soldiers dying than anticipated, they are losing faith in their ability to make a significant impact in the country, one worthy of the sacrifice of men like Sullivan.

At the time that the company loses Sullivan, casualties are still light. What they call the "expeditionary" period of the war lasts from March to September 1965. The men who are fighting in Vietnam at this time joined the war during peacetime, when the conflict hardly made the news. One-Three Battalion's total losses between March and August 1965, for example, amounted to 110 killed and wounded. In April 1966, a single company from that battalion lose 108 men in only an hour. Still, the company takes Sullivan's death as a sign that they may not all remain together until the end of their assignments. The corps will continue to function without the sergeant, of course, but his friends feel that he is irreplaceable. Later in the war, a man who is killed or evacuated with wounds will only mean a gap in a space that needs filling.

Caputo distinguishes between the war in 1965 and 1966 to illuminate how the increase in casualties and the escalation of the war led to a change in the marines' perceptions of their roles as soldiers. Initially, they felt that each man was individual and an essential part of a cohesive unit. As the war goes on, they become increasingly detached from one another, as a method of coping with loss. This sense of detachment, however, dehumanizes them and leads to their perception of other soldiers, less as individuals, and more as cogs in the machine that conducts war.

CHAPTER TEN

Just as Kazmarack predicted, Caputo's first night at headquarters is noisy. Across the road, "big guns" fire at road junctions, hilltops, and anywhere else the enemy is likely to be. Caputo spends the next day getting used to his administrative role as assistant adjutant. He looks at the "a truckload of paperwork" that has to be "inventoried and audited," in addition to messages, directives, and regimental orders that must be filed. Later, Schwartz briefs him on additional duties that no one else wants to perform. The additional work looks like a lot but will not require more than three or four additional hours of Caputo's time. Caputo learns that a clerk cannot do this work because regulations call for an officer to do it, and Anderson will not perform these tasks because he is a captain and does not have to do things he would rather not do.

Caputo learns that his position as an adjutant is superfluous and was only created due to the military's fastidious attention to regulations, which often seem arbitrary and due to the laziness of superior officers. His work seems trivial compared to the tasks that he performed on the battlefield, in which he was engaged in saving others' lives and preserving his own. He also felt like the warrior he was always eager to become, while his role as clerk relegates him to the kind of office position he sought to avoid by joining the Marines. As much as he feared the danger of the battlefield, he now misses it.

The additional duty of casualty reporting keeps Caputo especially busy. The job gives him a lot of bad dreams and stamps out any lingering romantic ideas he has about war. He reports both enemy casualties as well as those among the marines. It is a complicated task due to the military's elaborate procedures for everything. The KIA reports are particularly long and complicated, as these forms require additional information pertaining to burial and insurance policies. Caputo also has to use jargon to describe accidents. Some incidents, such as reporting injuries as a result of high explosives, cause semantic difficulties. When Lieutenant Colonel Meyers is blown apart by a booby-trapped 155-mm shell, Caputo describes it as a "traumatic amputation" of all limbs, including multiple lacerations to the abdomen with fragment wounds "through-and-through." He concludes with "killed in action."

Though casualty reporting initially seems like a trivial task, it is beneficial to Caputo—the job helps him understand that there is nothing particularly romantic about dying on a battlefield. In many instances, men die of accidents or lose limbs in fluke occurrences. The clinical language that the Marine Corps uses to describe deaths and injuries depersonalizes the casualties. Caputo does not yet realize it, but he is getting some training here that will prepare him for his later career as a reporter, in which he will cover others' deaths as a result of war and conflict. His work as an adjutant instructs him in the business of being clear-eyed about death and talking about it without any personal attachment.

Sometimes Caputo has to verify body counts due to the field commanders' tendency to exaggerate the number of VC their units have killed. When possible, the bodies are brought to headquarters, and Caputo counts them. The decomposing bodies are laid out on canvas stretchers and covered with ponchos or rubber body-bags, with yellow casualty tags tied to their boots or to their shirts, in instances in which their legs are blown away. The simplest way to identify a man who still has a face is to match him against a photograph in his service record book. Otherwise, they use dental records. Caputo finds that all races of dead men look the same, like "wax dummies of themselves." Their eyes are all "a washed-out gray" and "their mouths [are] opened wide, as if death had caught them in the middle of a scream." Their revolting smell is also the same.

Caputo learns that death is a great equalizer. A man's race, rank, and economic background do not matter at all when he becomes a corpse. Caputo takes on a very objective view of death, due to the necessity of reporting on casualties with accuracy. He is less squeamish about the sight of mutilated bodies than he was on the battlefield. Due to the fact that he did not know many of the men who arrive at headquarters or have any contact with them, they seem less real to him that the men whose mutilations and deaths he witnessed in the jungle.

Caputo's first day on the job as a casualty reporting officer is June 21, 1965. Early that same morning, a patrol from 2nd Battalion fights a small skirmish with the VC near Iron Bridge Ridge. Caputo's field phone buzzes with a notification from the battalion's adjutant reporting on four friendly casualties, one dead and three wounded. Due to all of the static on the line, the adjutant spells out the names phonetically. When the reports are called into division and filed, he goes over to operations to find out how many enemy casualties there are. Webb Harrison tells him there are four, all KIA. Caputo walks into the colonel's tent and makes the appropriate changes on the scoreboard where Anderson keeps a tally. Lieutenant Colonel Brooks examines the figures and says that Colonel Wheeler is giving a briefing for General Thompson this afternoon and will want the latest casualty statistics.

The deaths of other marines are now reduced to tallies on a scoreboard in the captain's office. Caputo separates the marines' deaths from those of the Viet Cong on the scoreboard. The presence of the scoreboard reduces the business of war to a game. Furthermore, the colonel's wish to show the casualty statistics to the general indicates that higher-ranking officers use others' deaths as the means through which they can impress their superiors and ensure their own promotions. This reveals a kind of ruthless indifference within the institution, in which war is a career-advancing opportunity.

Sometime later, a jeep drives into HQ carrying two dead VC and two civilian women who were injured in the fire-fight. The corpses are on a trailer hitched to the jeep. When the driver parks the jeep and unhitches the trailer, it tips forward, and a half-severed arm, "with a piece of bone protruding whitely through the flesh," hangs over the side of the trailer. Caputo counts the bodies, ensuring there are four. They are so entangled that they seem indistinguishable from each other, except for the fourth, which is missing most of its limbs. Another, hit in the midsection, has the "slick, blue and greenish brown mass of his intestines bulging out of him." Blood has pooled at the low end of the trailer.

Caputo's recollection of the four Viet Cong corpses reveals a detachment and objectivity that is very different from the horror with which he viewed the body of a Vietnamese man whose brains were spilling out. Caputo exhibits a strong ability to adapt to new circumstances, to evolve in response to change, and to perform the tasks that others require of him. His sense of identity as a soldier is characterized more by jadedness and duty, it seems, than by fantasies of heroism on the battlefield.

Caputo turns away and tells the driver to remove the bodies. The driver says that he was told to leave them where they are and get back to the motor pool. Caputo tells Kazmarack to take the bodies to the cemetery for the enemy dead, but Anderson insists that they stay. He says that the colonel wants the clerks to look at them and get used to the sight of blood. Caputo despises the idea and insists on burying them, but Anderson reminds him of the colonel's orders. So, the bodies are left lying in the sun. Then, the HQ troops are marched past the trailer to look at the dead VC. The bodies reek, releasing an odor like "cooking gas" or the hydrogen sulfide from a chemistry class. The procession ends, then Kazmarack and Corporal Stasek hitch up the trailer and drive toward the enemy cemetery, which Kazmarack describes as a "dump" for bodies.

Caputo is less repulsed by the presence of the rotting bodies than he is by the colonel's wish to display them to the clerks. It is unclear what the colonel expects from the clerks getting "used to the sight of blood." Perhaps he is worried that their distance from the battlefield has softened them, and he seeks to remind them that they are still at war. This is the first instance in the book in which Caputo finds an order from a superior morally objectionable and raises his voice to say so. He is cowered by the institution's hierarchy, however, in which another man's authority always trumps another person's attempt to do the right thing.

Ten minutes later, Captain Anderson comes into the tent and says that they need the bodies back. The colonel wants to show the bodies to the general when he briefs him. Though the captain knows that the bodies are gone, he wants someone who can drive a jeep to catch up with the jeep that is taking the corpses to the cemetery. Caputo cannot believe these orders, but he follows them. When he returns to his tent, he makes up a new title for himself, writes it on a piece of cardboard, and tacks it to his desk: "2LT P.J. Caputo. **Officer in Charge of the Dead**."

Now, the colonel wishes to display the bodies as trophies to the visiting general. Caputo knows better than to resist the order this time. The shuffling of the bodies back and forth and in and out of graves is both morbid and absurd. It also further disabuses Caputo of his previous sense of the body as a sacred entity that people are inclined to respect, even in death.

General Thompson arrives by helicopter with Colonel Wheeler on one side of him and Lieutenant Colonel Brooks on the other side. A couple of nervous-looking aides trail the three men. Their briefing starts and Stasek and Kazmarack return about fifteen minutes later. They both look exhausted. Stasek says that they had the bodies buried, then exhumed them. He says that the guts of one VC spilled out of him during the process, while another's leg began to come off while Stasek pulled at him. Caputo apologizes for what they went through, but he says that they will have to bring the bodies in when the briefing is over.

The neat orderliness of the officers contrasts with the dirty work that Stasek and Kazmarack have been forced to perform. This scene reveals the line between the high-ranking officers who reap the credit for enemy casualties and the lower-ranking officers and enlisted men who do the grim work of killing and counting bodies. Caputo is a middle man between the higher-ranking officers and the enlisted men. He performs no action and reaps no rewards.

When the briefing ends, General Thompson, Colonel Wheeler, and the other officers emerge from the tent. Caputo salutes them. They walk past him toward the corpses. The general glances at them, then he continues on to the LZ, where his helicopter awaits. Caputo spends the rest of the afternoon doing menial paperwork.

Caputo's salute is a sign of his obedience to protocol, as well as an indication of his desire for these men's approval. To them, however, he barely exists. Ironically, they are more interested in the enemy corpses that Caputo furnishes with his endless reports.

Caputo goes to the mess hall for dinner, where he sees Chaplain Ryerson and Milsovic. The chaplain talks to Caputo about the recent loss of another marine and asks Caputo if he thinks the boys are dying for a good reason or because "some officer wants a promotion." He also talks about the show that the colonel put on for the general earlier that day. The chaplain persists in asking Caputo what the Americans' purpose is in Vietnam, and Caputo throws up his hands in frustration at the question but still insists that Vietnam is not "that bad a war." The chaplain reminds Caputo that he and the doctor think in terms of human suffering, not statistics. He mentions the twelve KIA from April in the context of "twelve wrecked homes." Caputo loses his temper but apologizes when Milsovic intervenes. He finishes eating then goes back to his desk.

The chaplain and Milsovic confront Caputo with the moral problem presented by U.S. intervention in Vietnam, but Caputo clearly does not want to confront it. It would, after all, make his former comrades' deaths seem as though they occurred for no good reason. When the chaplain tries to contextualize the deaths in terms of the personal impact they will have on families and communities (which is quite distinct from Caputo's current conception of death within the scoreboard), Caputo loses his temper. It seems that he feels a lack of control over the situation but does not want to consider his role in facilitating it.

Caputo now finds it difficult to work, and the tent is stifling with heat. He knows that much of what Chaplain Ryerson said makes sense. He thinks that the general's observation of the dead VC was disrespectful. He also thinks that many of the Marine Corps' tactical operations seem futile and purposeless. He reflects on the chaplain's mention of "twelve wrecked homes" and contrasts them with the simple tally marks on the colonel's scoreboard, where that number sits in a different column from the enemy dead. Caputo thinks about Sullivan's widow in Pennsylvania. He works for a few more hours, has a beer, then goes to bed early. He has late-duty watch that night and knows that he will not get much sleep after midnight, with the howitzers booming all night.

Despite his initial anger, Caputo knows that he would not have reacted so strongly if he was not trying to resist the righteousness of the chaplain's comments. He is beginning to see that the Marines' work and sacrifices are not affecting any change in Vietnam. He thinks of how Sullivan's death will permanently impact the lives of his wife and children, while the high-ranking officers merely regard him as another tally mark. Caputo's lack of sleep is also negatively impacting him, making him less able to focus and contemplate his situation.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Early the next morning, Caputo awakes to the sounds of rifle fire and Webb Harrison's voice nearby. Harrison warns him of "visitors." Caputo steps out of his tent, guessing it is another probe. The night before, the VC tried to infiltrate through HQ company lines. They now seem to be looking for weak spots in the One-Three battalion's perimeter. He is only guessing, however, and has no real idea of what is going on. Some flares hit the ground. The regimental sergeant goes past him dressed only in a pair of green undershorts and is carrying a Thompson submachine gun in one hand. He jumps into the foxhole with a splash. When more flares go out, they see nothing but bushes. The firing stops and they wait for another hour, shivering and wet due to the cold rain, before the area is secured.

The danger of a VC raid is always present, though it does not usually occur. The regimental sergeant's almost comical charge in his underwear also reveals how the marines are constantly on alert for possible danger. In this instance, as in previous ones, the danger is only imagined. They have conjured vicious Viet Cong out of nearby bushes. The waiting also fosters the anticipation of danger which, as Caputo has previously noted, is, in some ways more worrisome than an actual attack.

Later, two dead VC are carried into the command post, where they are tied to bamboo poles "like bagged game." Caputo adds two to the number in the VC-KIA column on the scoreboard. The next week is the same, with additional probes of the HQ perimeter or the battalions' positions, random mortar attacks on isolated outposts, and a few attempted infiltrations of the airfield defenses, which are now guarded by 1st Battalion, 9th Marines. Due to all of the alarms, the soldiers get very little sleep.

Caputo's comparison of the dead VC to "bagged game" parallels with his previous mention of an Australian holding up a dead VC's ears like "prize-winning trout." Though the previous display shocked Caputo, he is now accustomed to the display of Vietnamese people as trophies of war.

That week, Harrison tells Caputo that the two VC they found were part of a five- or six-man enemy patrol. They were doing reconnaissance and got too close, getting themselves killed by a machine-gunner who shot them at point-blank range. This incident signals an increase in VC activity and the possibility of an enemy attack on the airfield. The VC are also amassing forces south of Da Nang, with the objective of seizing the city. Lastly, two North Vietnamese Army divisions are operating in the South, one in the Central Highlands and the other somewhere in I Corps.

The battalion's purpose is to protect the airfield. If the Viet Cong attack the airfield, it would signal that the battalion was negligent in its duties. The increase in VC activity also suggests that the U.S. Marines are not very successful in keeping them at bay. The fact that they are "amassing forces south of Da Nang" also suggests the possibility that people from South Vietnam are joining the Viet Cong's ranks.

A few days later, two VC are captured while scouting a portion of the regiment's positions in broad daylight. The following day, a patrol from the reconnaissance battalion sees a battery of enemy 82-mm mortars being moved toward the airfield. The patrol leader reports the map coordinates of the mortars and suggested that they were going to be used to shell the airfield. The report is noted and buried in a file cabinet. On the 28th, an ARVN district HQ near regimental HQ is shelled. The VC also drop mortars on an isolated section of One-Three Battalion's lines, killing and wounding several marines. Obviously, the VC are planning an attack on the airfield, whose defense is still their primary mission. However, the regimental staff is not overly fazed by this. Therefore, they do nothing but read and pursue other individual hobbies.

Caputo reveals how the Marines had every opportunity to prevent the inevitable attack on the airfield but did nothing. This reveals the occasional incompetence of the U.S. military to address avoidable problems. The willful ignorance about the VC's obvious plans to shell the airfield suggests laziness among the regimental staff, for an operation would have needed to be organized to foil the attack. The organization's inaction may also have been the result of exhaustion. The soldiers' pursuit of diversion over planning for the attack could have been the result of exasperation with the war and with the constant need to be on alert.

On July 1, the VC attack the airfield. The first shells hit around 2:00 A.M., when Caputo is just coming off of duty-watch in the operations tent. The shells burst rapidly, one after another, coloring the sky "a pale, flickering red." Inside the command post, marines roll out of bed and grab their weapons. Caputo goes back into the tent. He feels that he should do something, though he doesn't know what. The head officers arrive, along with Colonel Wheeler. Someone talks to One-Nine Battalion to find out where the attack is coming from and how many VC are out there. The colonel sits and stares at a big operations map, as though it can reveal what is happening.

Now that the attack is occurring, the officers feel useless. Colonel Wheeler feigns activity to mask the fact that he knows that any action, other than taking cover, is futile. Again, the marines are disturbed out of their sleep by shell fire. Caputo's description of their rolling out of bed and grabbing their weapons implies that they are so accustomed to the sudden alerts that they perform this ritual of reviving themselves from sleep, as though by rote.

Caputo starts to go out and runs into Major General Lew Walt. He salutes him, but Walt does not acknowledge the formality. Instead, the major general looks angry because the very attack that the Marines are there to prevent is happening. Caputo thinks that Walt is one of few high-ranking officers who takes the VC seriously. Caputo also thinks that, by moving his HQ so far forward, Walt was trying to set an example of personal leadership. He instills more discipline. He puts an end to movie nights at regimental HQ, makes Da Nang off limits to reduce drunkenness among soldiers, and orders the construction of a proper MLR, "with strongpoints, forward outposts, and preregistered artillery concentrations."

Major General Walt, who is still regarded as one of the most notable leaders of the Vietnam War, tries to instill discipline and morality within the Marines, believing that an absence of virtue has led to their inability to attend to their mission. However, his response is rather extreme and leads him to eliminate all diversion in an attempt to get the men to focus single-mindedly on the war. He does not realize that exhaustion with war is part of the reason why the Marines were unable to attend the problem in the first place.

Caputo puts on his helmet and flak jacket and goes over to the tent where the secret-and-confidential documents are stored in a safe. It is his duty to burn all of this with thermite grenades in the event that the camp is attacked and overrun. Sergeant Hamilton asks him if the VC are approaching and says that he has the grenades prepared to burn the tent down. Caputo does not think that they will hit them. He tells Hamilton that he does not want him burning any of the stuff in the tent unless the enemy is coming at him. Hamilton says that, if the enemy approaches, he will throw the grenades and then throw the files on top of the resulting flame to make a bonfire.

Caputo, who just a moment ago was feeling useless, finds something to do. He realizes that the Viet Cong can use the Marines' panic about attending to the airfield as an opportunity to infiltrate and steal intelligence. Caputo uses this prospect to reconstruct himself as a hero, or someone who can save the Marines from future problems by remaining cool and level-headed in the midst of an attack

With nothing else to do, Caputo goes back to his position on the perimeter. Each junior officer is responsible for a section of the perimeter. He is in charge of a corporal and ten other men. This is the closest thing to a command that he has at this post. They wait in their foxholes while a convoy carrying a rifle company rolls past, heading toward the base. The counterattack is getting under way. Caputo feels slight excitement when he sees the howitzers, "bouncing on their carriages behind the speeding trucks." A column of white flame from burning magnesium goes up over the airfield as shells burst in the rice fields south of the base.

The airfield has briefly restored Caputo's sense of the excitement and romance that war can provide. He enjoys being in command again, recalling his previous leadership role on the war front. He is also excited by the prospect of the imminent destruction of the Viet Cong as a result of the Marines' retaliation. The attack on the airfield has temporarily weakened the Marines, but the sight of the howitzers restores Caputo's confidence in America's dominance.

Later, Caputo and Kazmarack drive past the airfield. Most of it has escaped serious damage. However, two big transport planes are totally destroyed, two fighter planes look like "broken toys," and another is "just a pile of ashes and twisted metal." They see, too, the holes the VC blew or cut into the chain link fence along the perimeter road, while coming through the area Caputo's platoon manned back in March and April, when he believed they would win the war in a few months.

The attack on the airfield reveals that even America's exceptional machinery can be destroyed during an attack. The sight of the destroyed fighter planes, which now appear like "broken toys," reveal the vulnerability of U.S. military might. It is also proof to Caputo that a superior military is not always a clear indication that one will win a war.

CHAPTER TWELVE

There is no heavy fighting around Da Nang for the rest of the summer. During the day, hardly anything happens; the war occurs at night. The five-millimeter guns start their regular shelling and the VC begin their sniping and mortaring. The enemy arrives in twos and threes and dies in twos and threes, as do the Marines' own men. Caputo is twenty-four when the summer begins. He has only aged three months, though he feels three decades older. The men in his company do not die in great numbers, so he can recall them as individuals. Corporal Brian Gauthier is one example. A regimental HQ camp is named for him, due to his bravery in leading his men under an ambush, though he was mortally wounded. However, no such honor is given to a grenadier who died in the same ambush.

The war has resulted in a weariness in Caputo. Instead of feeling like the hearty hero from his fictional fantasies, he feels like an elder who has witnessed the death of his friends. Caputo notices, too, how the military draws distinction between soldiers and awards them according to feats of heroism. Thus, Gauthier is honored for leading men in an ambush while enduring an injury, but a grenadier who died in the same ambush is deemed less worthy because he performed no extraordinary act during the event other than his job.

Caputo remembers Nick Pappas, too, and the rainy night when he went to the hospital to identify three marines from his old platoon, Devlin, Lockhart, and Bryce. All three were blown up in a listening-post bunker ahead of C Company's lines. Corporal Gunderson says that he found and retrieved the bodies. Wet, muddy ponchos cover everything but their boots. The doctor pulls a poncho off of Devlin's body, and Caputo identifies him. After watching the doctor examine the three men, Caputo gets back into the jeep, feeling dizzy. Kazmarack starts the engine. Just then, Murph McCloy pulls up in another jeep. He has arrived to ensure that the bodies arrived all right. Caputo asks if an accident caused their deaths; he needs to know for his report. McCloy says that an investigation will be done the next day, but Caputo does not think it will make much difference.

The sight of the men from Caputo's old platoon reminds him, yet again, of the vulnerability of men at war. They are covered in wet and muddy ponchos as though they were brought in fresh from the field, having very recently been shot dead. This is the first instance in which Caputo registers a personal reaction to the bodies brought in for him to report. His feeling of dizziness occurs, perhaps, as a result of being awakened to the reality of recording actual deaths as opposed to tally marks on his captain's scoreboard.

That night, in a dream, Caputo is given command of a new platoon. Devlin, Bryce, and Lockhart are in the first of three ranks. Sullivan and Frank Reasoner, another deceased soldier, are there, too. In fact, everyone who stands in formation is dead. Caputo is, indeed, the **Officer in Charge of the Dead**. He wakes from this nightmare, afraid and soaking in his sweat. A mortar tube fires in the distance. He smokes a cigarette and falls into an uneasy sleep.

Caputo's dream is an indication of his sense of ineffectuality in response to the war. He has lost his friends and observed the corpses of countless young men whose lives have been trivialized to tally marks. He is afraid, too, of confronting the thought of his own mortality.

Caputo is not going crazy, but he witnesses others slowly losing their minds. Many are suffering from anxiety and depression. He, too, thinks about men like Sullivan and Reasoner and feels emptiness and a sense of futility. He hates going to the scoreboard and writing in new numbers. One Navy corpsman shoots himself in the foot to avoid going out on more patrols. Caputo also recalls the story of Olson and Harris, in which the latter marine kills the former due to what Caputo calls "combat madness"—a mixture of exhaustion, fury, being desensitized to violence, and hopelessness.

The moments of insanity that Caputo witnesses in response to the war are regarded as isolated incidents, though he sees them as consequences of pervasive problems with morale. While Caputo endures a feeling of emptiness due to his morbid work, other soldiers feel that they cannot escape from an endless cycle of being on the lookout for an attack. The lack of asleep and the constant sense of panic easily lead to breaks from reason and humanity.

Operation Blast Out begins and ends in early August. Three thousand marines and ARVN soldiers, supported by a range of high-tech equipment, manage to kill twenty-four VC in three days. Some enemy soldiers and VC suspects are brought to HQ for questioning. They are going to be interrogated and then turned over to the South Vietnamese Army, who will probably kill them. A boy of eighteen knows this and starts to cry when his older comrade is led away for questioning. A marine tells him to keep his mouth shut. A sergeant harshly questions his older comrade and grabs his face when the VC refuses to look at him. The other suspects are blindfolded and marched down the road, single-file. They look ragged, underfed, and all under forty. An old man, the last in line, is having trouble keeping up.

In this instance, Caputo depicts the fear that Viet Cong soldiers feel in response to their enemies—both the Americans and the South Vietnamese. The boy's expression of sorrow in response to his older comrade's capture reveals the camaraderie and loyalty that exists among the soldiers on the other side of the conflict. Meanwhile, the American soldiers' harsh treatment of the boy in response to this fails to evoke sympathy. Caputo reveals here that constructions of a good side versus a bad side are not easily formed in this war.

The line stops, and the VC suspects are told to lie on their stomachs in a field. The guards tie them up or roll them over to search for documents. The documents are then placed in small piles and are examined by ARVN interpreters who ask the suspects questions. If everything is in order, the Vietnamese man is declared a civilian and released; if not, he is taken into a tent and interrogated by the sergeant who dealt with the stubborn older VC. A very old man searches through the piles for his papers and looks worried. Valid identification means the difference between life and death. Finally, he finds his papers and puts them in his shirt pocket. The ARVN soldier will look at him, see that he is a harmless old man, then see his documents and let him return to his village. The old man, for the moment, is spared becoming another casualty of war.

The fact that one's life hinges on his ability to furnish the right paperwork, validating his identity, points to the arbitrary nature of the war and the arbitrary means through which the Americans and South Vietnamese identify the Viet Cong. False documents could easily be drawn up and an innocent person who loses his identification could wrongfully be identified as a member of the Viet Cong. The old man's age and ability to provide identification spare him his life, but this sight makes Caputo wonder if there is any valid system for identifying enemies and allies.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Monsoons begin in mid-September. Regimental headquarters move forward in the same month, to a patch of muddy flats near the Dai-La Pass. There are more guns now, more barbed wire, and three to four times as many casualties. There are two hills in front of the new position. The VC are expected to launch a monsoon offensive, which they do every year. The new MLR is supposed to stop them from overrunning the airfield. The marines start to construct a big command bunker in response to reports that the VC are getting heavy mortars and long-range rockets. Colonel Nickerson orders the junior officers to dig alongside the enlisted men to get the job done faster, but the rain makes the digging more difficult. Then, Colonel Nickerson demands that they stop what they are doing to get to work on his horseshoe pit, much to Lieutenant Nargi's irritation.

There is repetition in the activity of both the Viet Cong and the American Marines. The Viet Cong mount a monsoon offensive every year and, once again, the Americans are going to try to protect the airfield from an attack. The Viet Cong are acquiring more sophisticated weaponry and are causing more casualties, suggesting progress in their objective to overtake South Vietnam and reunify their country under Communism. Despite these advances, Colonel Nickerson is less concerned with the marines protecting themselves than he is with them attending to his horseshoe pit.

One evening, Colonel Nickerson walks into the mess hall and finds several officers drinking beer. He says that he ordered that there would be no drinking in the mess after 7:30 P.M.. The captain reminds Nickerson that there would be no hard liquor after 7:30 P.M., but that they could drink beer until 9:30 P.M.. The colonel denies saying that and demands that they get back to work. He now says that there will be "no nothing served in this mess after 6:30 P.M." Aside from this, he does allow a football pool, for it is one of his passions.

Nickerson is temperamental and abusive of his power. Not only does he stop the marines from building a bunker, which they require for their protection, but he also forbids them from having any diversion other than the football pool, his own passion. He sets arbitrary rules and the lower-ranking marines have no choice but to follow them.

Caputo's old battalion, One-Three, is sent to Camp Pendleton for reorganization. Many of its original members are discharged or transferred to other units. They have lost some of their friends and most of their old convictions about the reasons for going to war. The 1st Battalion, 1st Marines take over for One-Three. They have just arrived in San Diego, looking healthy and "ruddy-faced." The eleven hundred men in the One-One are confident that they can defeat the VC. They stay from September to March, when the monsoon campaign ends. They are then moved up to Hue and from Hue to the Demilitarized Zone, where they fight harder battles against the Vietnamese. After six months, they suffer 475 killed and wounded. Half are patched up and sent to fight again, only to be wounded again. A little less than two hundred are permanent losses, either dead or hospitalized for long periods.

The war's rotation has the same results for each battalion: they arrive healthy and in perfect physical condition to fight, suffer extreme losses, and then end up demoralized. Part of the problem may be their confidence in believing that they can defeat the Viet Cong. This confidence comes from believing that the United States has the world's most powerful and effective military. Though this is true, the young marines do not realize that the Vietnamese have been fighting for centuries against colonizers and interlopers and have found methods to outwit even the most sophisticated and persistent of their enemies.

The attrition rate works out to eight men per week, almost equal to that suffered by British battalions on the Western Front in 1915 and early 1916. Caputo writes seventy-five or eighty reports per week and, these names mean no more to him than the names in a phone book. This changes on September 18 when the 2nd platoon in C Company suffers two killed and three wounded. The first KIA is a corpsman who suffered a GSW through the head. The second is First Lieutenant Walter Neville Levy. Lieutenant Jones says that a patrol from the 9th Marines fell into an ambush and called for reinforcements. Levy's platoon was ambushed before they could help. Levy was hit by mine shrapnel. The corpsman was sniped while treating another marine with a bullet wound. As he tried to pull the corpsman out of the line of fire, Levy was sniped.

Caputo compares the massive losses suffered by the Americans to those suffered by the British during another war between imperial powers, another war fought to determine future borders. Caputo is as alienated from the fact of death as many World War I veterans were in the aftermath of that conflict. However, when he hears about Levy's death, he is jolted out of his indifference. Unlike the deaths of Devlin, Bryce, and Lockhart, Caputo regarded Levy as more of an equal, both because they shared the same rank and because they were men of similar backgrounds and interests. Levy's death re-alerts Caputo to his own vulnerability to death.

Caputo thinks of how he has been in Vietnam for seven months and has "not been scratched." Levy lasted only two weeks. He remembers Levy's qualities and recalls what they shared in common and how they differed. Caputo knows though, that he could not have done what Levy did—pulling himself up on wounded legs to save a corpsman. Caputo remembers the small things about Levy that made the other marines love him—his gestures, words, and quite simply, the good man he was and what he stood for.

The fact that Caputo has gone through the war unharmed gives him a sense of how lucky he is, though he does not know why he has benefited from such luck. He thinks of how much more heroic Levy was and recognizes his own inability to perform a similar act, despite his wish for a hero's glory. Caputo's focus on Levy's memory restores Caputo's belief in humanity.

Colonel Nickerson says that he has trouble sleeping due to a company from One-One suffering too many casualties during a week-long operation. Out of 170 men, they lose about forty to booby traps and ambush-detonated mines. He tells Caputo that he cannot sleep half the time, "thinking about those kids." It is not a confession that colonels usually make to lieutenants, so Caputo does not know what to tell him. Two days later, the colonel is talking tough about the marines and trivializing the platoon's fifteen recent casualties. Colonel Nickerson recalls how, when he landed at Guadalcanal, ninety percent of his platoon was wiped out in an hour. With only five or six men left, they kept fighting. When he pauses for breath in his story, Caputo says that he has to get back to work and Nickerson brusquely dismisses him.

Nickerson's unstable reactions to war, as well as his unstable treatment of the marines, reveals an inability to reconcile his duty with the constant loss of the marines. The comment that he makes two days later seems like a negation of his earlier confession to Caputo. However, it is possibly a statement that Nickerson makes to avoid confronting the seriousness of this war, which has escalated beyond the U.S. military's expectations and is taking more American lives every day.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In late October, an enemy battalion attacks a helicopter base, inflicts fifty casualties on the company guarding it, and destroys or damages over forty aircraft. Two nights later, another VC battalion overruns a post manned by eighty marines from A Company, killing twenty-two and wounding fifty more. The fighting has become more intense and more vicious. One of the 1st Battalion's radio operators, for instance, is tied up, beaten with clubs, then executed. His body is found floating in the Song Tuy Loan three days later. Adam Simpson's twenty-eight-man patrol is ambushed by 200 VC and almost annihilated. Only two marines, both seriously wounded, survive. More might have survived if the VC did not go down the line of fallen marines, pumping bullets into those who showed signs of life, including Simpson. The two who survived had crawled under the bodies of dead comrades and feigned death.

The Viet Cong are becoming more vicious in their attacks against the American Marines. However, Caputo is clear about the fact that neither side is innocent. Neither the Viet Cong nor the Americans have rules of engagement, which make atrocities increasingly common. It seems, too, that the Viet Cong are as disinclined to take prisoners as the Americans are and prefer to coldly murder those whom they capture. Caputo's recollection of the murder of his former classmate, Adam Simpson, exemplifies how the killing during the war took on a personal dimension. The thought of the VC "pumping bullets" into those who showed signs of life contrasts sharply with the distant war conducted with shells and rifles.

On the other hand, few captured VC ever make it to prison camps. Some line companies kill every VC they see, as well as those who are only suspects. There is no orderliness to this war and no solid rules of engagement. In the middle of November, Caputo requests to be transferred to a line company in 1st Battalion and his request is granted. He feels useless and a little guilty for doing relatively nothing while other men risk their lives. He is also still fascinated by life on the front, where he experiences "a headiness that no drink or drug could match." Fear of madness is another motive. He is sure that another few months of examining bodies will land him in a psychiatric ward. Finally, he feels a hatred for the VC and a desire for getting revenge for the deaths of Simpson and Levy.

Caputo longs for action and the excitement of war. The routine drudgery of reporting on deaths desensitizes him, but it also deprives him of the chance for retribution. He resents passively hearing about the deaths of his comrades and watching their bodies show up mutilated from war. As long as he remains the "Officer in Charge of the Dead," he will be incapable of helping to prevent future deaths. Though Caputo is not convinced that his presence would make any difference, he remains emotionally attached to the idea of saving his fellow soldiers.

Jim Cooney is brought in to replace Caputo. Kazmarack drives him to One-One's headquarters, but not before Sergeant Hamilton sees Caputo off. Caputo runs various errands to ensure his transfer then meets with the commanding officer at Battalion HQ, Lieutenant Colonel Hatch. He tells Caputo that he will get a platoon in C Company, Levy's old company. Captain Neal is the skipper, and McCloy is the executive officer. Neal assigns Caputo to the second platoon, where he will take over for Levy. The whole division is now on the defensive, trying to prevent another VC attack on the airfield by holding the MLR. Mines and booby traps account for all of the company's casualties. Caputo tries to keep a lookout for immersion foot, due to the men being constantly wet. They are also often tired and hungry, due to poor rations.

Ironically, Caputo takes the place of his old friend, Levy. Though Caputo is joining a new company in a new battalion, he is rejoining some of the soldiers from his first assignment. The effect is similar to that of being reunited with family members. The task, too, remains the same—to prevent another attack on the airfield. The persistent attention to this mission reinforces the repetitive nature of war, in which little changes other than the reshuffling of bodies into new positions. Caputo's other job is to help maintain the health of the soldiers so that they can continue to fight.

Captain Neal assigns Caputo to go up on the line that night. At about 7:00 P.M., Caputo goes to the line with his new platoon. He crawls into the command post—a foxhole encircled with sandbags and covered by a leaky poncho. Caputo listens for mortars but cannot hear anything. It is soon dark, and the wind is blowing. Around midnight, automatic fire spatters into one of the positions near the hamlet. The squad leader says that twenty rounds have been fired into his team's right side, but there are no casualties. Then, there is another burst. Caputo goes through the village along with a rifleman. Bullets stream past them, and Caputo goes down on his stomach. One of the riflemen shoots into the trees, and then some grenades are thrown in. They wait for about thirty minutes and then head back toward the command post.

While he was allowed a period of adjustment when he started his previous assignment as an adjutant, now Caputo is immediately put back into the field and is confronted right away with the danger that he longed for when he worked as a clerk. Again, Caputo is threatened with shelling and possible illness due to the climate. However, his responses in the field are active and instinctive. He knows how to listen for mortars and when to go down on his stomach when the bursts are too close. This is very different from his passive attitude at regimental headquarters, when he took little interest in what he was doing.

On the way back, an old Vietnamese farmer tries to sell them pornographic photos. The marines sleep uneasily that night and awake to "a drizzling dawn." For a month, there is little action and endless misery. The men spend their days avoiding snakes and insect bites. At the end of the month, the VC stage a small attack on the village. Caputo and Sergeant Coffell are talking to each other to stay awake. Automatic rifle-fire crackles behind them, then they are inundated by hand grenades. Caputo crawls up to the road embankment to see if he can spot the enemy. He sees VC in the village, shooting in every direction. He tells Coffell that the VC are behind them, and that he should face his soldiers toward the road and have them shoot anything that moves.

Caputo has settled into the duller and more aggravating aspects of his routine as an infantry soldier. Typically, there is a moment of excitement when the Viet Cong attack. There is a contrast between Caputo's image of the "drizzling dawn," which evokes a feeling of calm, and the noise and tension that arise during the Viet Cong attack. There is a contrast, too, between the natural beauty the men experience in Vietnam and the terror created by warfare and modern machinery.

Caputo tries for fifteen minutes to get through to Captain Neal. Neal says that he has not heard anything and Caputo knows why: he was asleep in the company's base camp, which is where he is every night while the men are out fighting. The skirmish ends by the time Caputo finishes talking to Neal. The next morning, Caputo sits with a cup of coffee. He is exhausted just like everyone else—they stayed up all night because they were on alert to an enemy battalion moving in their direction. Neal meets Caputo in the mess and says that, according to his service record, Caputo has never had a rest-and-relaxation period during his nine months in Vietnam. He asks Caputo if he would like to go to Saigon for three days. Caputo says "yes" without hesitation.

Neal's authority as a captain gives him the privilege to avoid the unpleasant aspects of war, such as staying up late due to an alert on an enemy battalion. Caputo's tone suggests resentment of this exercise of privilege while lower-ranking men go without sleep and other comforts. This contrasts, too, with his admiration for officers who forgo their privileges to demonstrate loyalty both to the cause and to their soldiers. As though to make up for his absence, Neal offers Caputo a period of rest.

Caputo stays at the Meyercourt in Saigon, a hotel reserved for soldiers on R-and-R. He sees shellfire flickering on the horizon and guns boom rhythmically. There is no complete escape from the war. He goes to a sidewalk café for breakfast. An old woman with a missing left arm hands him a note, saying that she is fifty years old, and lost both her arm and her husband in a bombardment, during a battle with the VC in 1962. She asks for 20 piasters; Caputo gives her 100.

The dismembered old woman is a consequence of the war. Out of sympathy (and possibly guilt), Caputo gives her more money than she asks for. Though he tries to separate himself from the war and acts as much like a civilian as he can, the shellfire in the distance reminds him of why he is in Vietnam.

On his second day in Saigon, Caputo converses with an Indian silk merchant and, in the evening, has dinner on the terrace of the Continental Palace Hotel, a mainstay of the French colonials who have stayed on in Vietnam. Caputo orders a bottle of wine and a Chateaubriand, despite the meal being for two. He watches the Frenchmen nearby and sees them as people who are living, not merely surviving. He fantasizes about staying in Saigon and living life again but feels guilty about the possibility of deserting.

Caputo models his behavior after the French colonials. He indulges in good food and wine and mingles with the locals. He imagines what his life would be like in Saigon if he were not a soldier. However, both of the contexts in which he imagines his life, as a colonial and as a soldier, are inseparable from an experience in which the Vietnamese are subordinated. Furthermore, his loyalty to the Marines makes civilian life seem unfathomable.

At the end of his stay, Caputo is standing on the tarmac, waiting for a C-130 to taxi to a stop. He jokes with an old gunnery sergeant who tells him jokes and stories about fighting on Iwo Jima and in Korea. The hatch of the plane opens and corpses are carried off in green rubber body bags. The mood changes and no one speaks. The gunnery sergeant, a veteran of three wars, shakes his head and curses this one.

Whereas the gunnery sergeant feels a sense of glory in the previous conflict, he suggests that there is a senselessness to the war in Vietnam. More young men are dying and, unlike the other conflicts, the Americans and the South Vietnamese are not making any progress.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A drizzling rain falls as the platoon makes its way to the Tuy Loan River trail, which was named Purple Heart Trail three months ago. Lance Corporal Crowe walks delicately. Behind him, Allen and Lonehill look for snipers. Caputo follows them with Jones behind him, then the rest of the patrol. Jones alerts Allen to a sniper in the right flank, and Allen pops a grenade launcher three times. Lonehill sprays the trees with his automatic rifle, then the platoon comes running up the trail. There are only four people in the village: two old women, a girl, and a small boy. The old woman hands them an ID and, when questioned, says that she has not seen any VC. Caputo thinks she's stubborn and fantasizes about slapping her with the back of his hand. He lets her go, and she shuffles away.

The naming of the trail is ironic. It is a place in which marines have endured substantial casualties, which the institution rewards with honors. Though there is honor in the idea of sacrificing one's self to the institution, the soldiers seek to avoid any situation that would result in being awarded a Purple Heart. Caputo's hostility toward the old woman results from frustration due both to cultural differences and the belief that the villagers are against the marines and secretly working with the Viet Cong. Caputo perceives enemies everywhere and mistakes miscommunication for deception.

On the 23rd, Caputo's regiment links up with D Company to conduct a three-day operation, called Harvest Moon, to clear the VC out of Hoi-Vuc. The platoon is in a cheerful mood, marching toward Charley Hill. At this point in his service, Caputo has ceased to care about dying. The platoon marches all morning and all afternoon. The trail climbs into high country and the Song Tuy Loan gets narrower. Crowe and Caputo take turns hacking through the brush with a machete, and leeches drop from the leaves and latch onto their necks.

Caputo's indifference about death no longer stems from his secret wish to be a hero. He has simply stopped caring so that death will not come as a shock. His indifference also eliminates his fear in confronting the Viet Cong and makes him a bolder soldier. He is not eager to go to battle, but he no longer dreads it either.

The rifleman ahead of Caputo drops to one knee and holds up his right hand to signal that everyone halt. Allen whispers hurriedly that there are three VC standing by a pagoda. Ten or fifteen more are around the bend in the river. Caputo tells them to hold their fire unless they are seen. Caputo is still on his belly and turns as slowly as he can, afraid that the VC can hear the beating of his heart.

Caputo's earlier expression of indifference immediately dissolves when he realizes that the guerrillas are close. He suddenly becomes more attuned to his body and its life force and worries now about getting shot. The instinct to survive is stronger than any psychological trick to feign indifference.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Caputo creeps through the grass, afraid that someone will see or hear him. He prays to God, then feels guilty for praying that God will help him kill. A rifle shot rings out, and a VC throws his arms up in the air before falling on his back. Another guerrilla pulls him into the underbrush as Caputo gets to his feet, and a third has taken cover behind a shrine. The marines come under heavy fire. Allen lays down a barrage with his grenade launcher. Caputo knows the platoon cannot assault the VC across the river, but they can pour "withering fire" into them, killing some and driving the others away. Caputo lunges into the woods and calls for a machine gun and a 3.5-inch rocket team. He calls for the first and third squads to go on the line. Led by Sergeant Wehr, the marines run out of the jungle.

There is a conflict between Caputo's religious faith and instruction and his faith and instruction in the Marine Corps. The organization has encouraged him to kill for his country and for the protection of himself and his comrades, but he feels guilty still about committing the act. Knowing, too, how much of his survival relies on pure chance, the only sensible appeal he believes he can make for his survival is to God. Caputo's appeal to God mirrors the third guerrilla's action of taking cover behind a shrine. Both men seem to be looking for divine help to survive.

The marines pour volleys in the village. Allen runs up to Caputo. His blue eyes look crazed. He has seen some of the VC fleeing. Another fell as a result of being hit by machine-gun fire. Some enemy fire comes at the marines, but it is poorly aimed. Caputo passes the word that the VC are on the run and D Company has killed two more of them. The marines are now like predators who want to charge across the river toward fleeing prey. Caputo wants to cross the river and level the village, and then kill the remaining VC in close combat, by tearing out their guts with bayonets.

Caputo's wish to kill the Viet Cong in close combat may be his quiet desire to exact revenge against them in the same manner in which his former classmate, Adam Simpson, was killed. He fantasizes about ripping their bodies apart in an animal-like manner that is very different from his previous self-image as a stoic, morally upright soldier.

When the fire-fight is over, Caputo cannot come down from the high. He imagines himself as John Wayne in a war film, waving his arms and daring a sniper to hit him. The sniper declines his offer, and Caputo calms down. The captain calls in and congratulates the platoon for doing a fine job. Their purpose is to be a diversionary force, and they have provided the VC with plenty of diversion. They are to remain in the position for the night. This makes Caputo nervous, because the enemy knows where they are. The platoon forms a perimeter and digs holes as deeply as they can. They then slide in and light cigarettes. Caputo polishes his carbine and thinks of how he has not killed anyone with it, but he has caused a few deaths, and enjoyed watching the first VC die.

Caputo envisions himself as the ultimate emblem of masculinity and conquest in cinema. Though he claims to be indifferent to his own death, he measures his strength as a soldier within his ability to cause the deaths of the Viet Cong. He draws a distinction between killing someone and causing a death. Caputo seems to think that only direct and personal contact with the enemy would count as killing someone, whereas he thinks that the shooting of rifles and the throwing of grenades is too impersonal to count as killing.

The monsoon rains return that night. While lying half asleep in six inches of water, someone yells, "INNNCOMMIIING!" There is some high-pitched whistling, which grows louder. The ground shakes from shells smashing into the earth, which explode one after another. Then, the shelling stops. Caputo crawls out to the edge of the perimeter and sees that the platoon has survived. Sergeant Pryor walks over and sits down next to Caputo, who asks how much longer Pryor has to go. He says that he has seven or eight more months. After trying for thirty minutes, Jones reaches D Company. The platoon is north in Hill 92, in the foothills, where they are setting up a patrol base. It takes six or seven hours to reach it. Halfway up, they see a booby-trapped barricade. They throw grenades to ease their path around the barricade. The platoon reaches Hill 92 in the midafternoon.

Time is a primary concern for Caputo and the other marines. Much of their job involves waiting—not only for the enemy, but also for reaching the next point in battle and for the time in which they will be relieved from service. There is a continuity to their lives, mirrored in the change of the seasons and the coming of the monsoons, which is only disrupted by the sporadic shock of the shell attacks. Everywhere the men go there are potential threats to their lives, for which they must remain alert.

Caputo checks the marines for immersion foot. Their shriveled skin is covered with red pustules and blisters. They eat lunch, which is the same as the Viet Cong's: cooked rice rolled into a ball and stuffed with raisins. Caputo senses that they are becoming more like the enemy. Captain Neal calls on the radio and announces a Christmas cease-fire that has gone into effect. As they hike down Purple Heart Trail, Caputo sees smoke trailing from a hut at the edge of the hamlet, and a woman runs out yelling. When Caputo asks who set it, the platoon sergeant tells him that someone said that the word came from Caputo to burn it. Caputo orders that they put the fire out. He is then hit by a mine. A piece of shrapnel sticks in one of his trouser legs but does not pierce the skin.

Being in Vietnam has caused the men to adapt more to Vietnamese habits. However, they remain vulnerable to health concerns, due to not learning or adapting to the particularities of fighting in the jungle. The misguided order to burn the hamlet reveals the difficulties in communication between marines, even when a platoon is traveling together through the jungle. Finally, Caputo has his first experience with nearly becoming a serious casualty when he is hit by a mine. His lack of injury in the incident reinforces the sense that he has somehow been blessed with greater fortune than his deceased friends.

Some thirty or forty feet behind them, there is a patch of scorched earth and a dead tree with a charred and cracked trunk. Sergeant Wehr lies near the crater. Both he and Allen stagger to their feet. Allen, however, complains about a headache and has blood oozing from a wound in the back of his head and his neck. Caputo thinks that this was an ambush-detonated mine. If it were a booby trap or a pressure mine, it would have gone off when Caputo first stood on the spot, near the tree, where the blast occurred. He thinks, too, that, if not for his flak jacket, the blast would have destroyed his spine. Wehr has a leg injury. A corpsman cuts his trouser leg open and dresses his wounds. Sanchez has been hit in the face with shrapnel and looks as though his face has been clawed.

Everyone around Caputo has been injured after the explosion of the mine, except for Caputo. The sight of the scorched earth and the dead tree contrast with previous idyllic images of the jungle and are reminders of vulnerability and destruction. The dead tree with the charred and cracked trunk also parallels with Caputo's imagined fear that, if he had stepped on a different kind of mine, his spine would have snapped, just as the trunk of the tree has snapped as a result of this blast.

Corporal Rodella, whose lung was torn by a piece of shrapnel, requires more serious attention—he is in danger of drowning in his own blood. Caputo carries him to the LZ. Caputo then carries Corporal Greeley, whose left arm was torn off, to safety while radioing in for a medevac. Captain Neal asks if there have been any serious casualties. He then accuses Caputo of not supervising his men properly due to so many casualties. Furiously, Caputo demands the helicopters again and says that if one of the soldiers dies due to "petty bullshit," he is going to raise hell. After a long pause, Neal confirms that the "birds," or helicopters will be sent.

Neal's callous and delayed response to the emergency is due to his distance from the battlefield, which Caputo mentioned earlier. He is more concerned with protocol and demonstrations of leadership, not realizing that such measures do not always work or matter in the midst of a battle. Caputo refers to Neal's comments as "petty bullshit" because they mean nothing in relation to the immediate need of protecting the men's lives.

The helicopters arrive, and the injured men are lifted into the aircraft. Just before the platoon resumes its march, someone finds a detonating cord lying in the grass near the village. In revenge, Caputo orders rocket launcher teams to fire white phosphorus shells into the hamlet. He hears people yelling and sees several running through the white smoke, but he feels nothing.

Caputo desires revenge against the villagers because they have assisted the Viet Cong in nearly killing him and several of his comrades. His indifference to their screams comes from his sense that they are getting what they deserve.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Eleven days after the patrol, Greeley, Rodella, and Sanchez are recovering in a hospital. January 5 is the platoon's third night of waiting for Operation Long Lance to start. The operation calls for the battalion to make a night helicopter assault somewhere about twenty-five miles southwest of Da Nang. This would be the second nighttime helicopter assault in history. The VC regiment has a battery of 37-mm anti-aircraft cannon and, in daylight, the helicopters would be defenseless against them. Preparations for the operation are thorough because they are going into an area where no American or South Vietnamese units have previously gone. Intelligence cannot determine how many enemy units are in the valley.

Given that the marines are more inclined to fear danger at night, the prospect of a nighttime helicopter assault seems much more suspect. Furthermore, there is the danger of going into territory that is unknown to other Americans and their allies. The prospect suggests a danger even greater than that which Greeley, Rodella, and Sanchez have faced. Ironically, here Caputo receives the opportunity that he has always wanted to do something historically significant, though it comes at great risk.

Shortly after dawn, an order comes in: the marines are to risk a daylight assault. The helicopters start to make "a tight circling descent." Caputo hears the "muffled popping of small-arms fire" and sees puffs of smoke. A helicopter assault in the LZ is always cause for concern, due to a total sense of helplessness in the enclosed space. The platoon lies against the slope of the crescent-shaped ridge, firing into the tree line from which the VC are shooting at the helicopters that are landing the rest of the battalion. Mortar shells go off in front of the marines and behind them. Staggering, they follow Caputo to the ridge. He yells for the soldiers to spread out. So far, HQ has lost eight officers and a number of enlisted men. Only Colonel Hatch escapes serious injury.

The last-minute change comes with the prospect of even greater danger than the night-time assault, due to the fact that the aircraft will be visible to the enemy. They are attacked immediately, and Caputo worries about the possibility of becoming trapped in the helicopter, making it easier for the Viet Cong to kill him and his platoon. The scene is filled with a sense of claustrophobia—both the concerns about being trapped in the helicopter and being pressed against the ridge.

Battalion HQ has nearly been wiped out, and Caputo's platoon is supposed to hold the ridge until told to do otherwise. The Skyhawk planes come in several minutes later. VC machine-gunners fire at one of them. They drop bombs. A third one comes in and drops napalm. Through his binoculars, Caputo can see men dying and pleading for mercy. All that remains of one VC is "a few scattered piles of bloody rags."

Caputo is responsible for managing his platoon in the midst of what has become a crisis for both sides in the war. His narration about what has happened to the enemy reveals the ease with which napalm could disintegrate a body, making it a morally questionable weapon.

Later, while searching a village called Ha Na, a corporal approaches Caputo with a Vietnamese man at gunpoint. The man is about forty and says that he teaches school. Caputo orders the corporal to tie the man up and take him to the skipper. Several minutes later, a fighter-bomber comes in to strafe the VC positions on the far side of the Vu Gia River, firing rockets and a cannon. Half of Ha Na is in flames. D Company, on C Company's left flank, runs into heavy resistance. C Company has to get to Hill 52 quickly to help them; they are pinned down and have lost thirteen men. While running uphill, Caputo loses control of his men and of himself. They whoop like savages, torch thatch huts, and toss grenades onto cement houses. When they reach the hill, they are ordered to remain for the night.

The scene that Caputo illustrates is like a portrait of hell. Brutality becomes a virtue. Caputo's loss of control is not a loss of his command but a loss of the façade of stoicism that he once believed was befitting of a marine. Now, he and his men embrace the savagery that the war has evoked from within them. The scene that Caputo depicts, as well as his characterization of his fellow marines as "savages," is ironic, given that they supposedly come from the superior civilization. They are in Vietnam to maintain democracy and a Western standard of government, though that standard has also led to this behavior.

The platoon is quiet again while they dig their foxholes. Caputo surmises that the burning of Ha Na arose out of some emotional necessity. The platoon is ashamed of what it has done and still wonders if they were the ones who actually did it. They notice how they have changed from disciplined soldiers into savages and back into soldiers again. Captain Neal is furious when he finds out about the burning of the hamlet and says that Caputo will be relieved of duty if such a thing ever happens again. They destroyed the homes of about 200 people. Just before dawn, the VC make a weak attack against the battalion's lines and are driven off with mortar fire. Helicopters fly in to evacuate casualties and to resupply the battalion with rations and ammunition. The war goes on.

For Caputo views the burning of the village as a form of catharsis. He and the other soldiers required some form of emotional release after months of enduring the anxiety of waiting for an attack, hearing about the deaths of comrades, and dealing with their underlying sexual frustration. Neal, however, reminds him that his behavior is not befitting an officer. Though the U.S. Marines encourage their men to kill, they are only to do so within the parameters of the institution's guidelines, which remain arbitrary.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Caputo is sitting on the roof of the outpost's command, sunning his legs. The heat is suffocating, as it always is between monsoon storms. Lance Corporal Crowe goes to Caputo to make his report. He says that the patrol has picked up some intelligence. He reminds Caputo of the three VC suspects they found in Giao-Tri two weeks ago. The men were carrying papers that were obvious forgeries, and their ages were falsified. Lieutenant McCloy, who now speaks fluent Vietnamese, interrogated them along with an ARVN militia sergeant. The men were released when the sergeant determined that they falsified their ages so that they could stay in school and out of the army. They just seemed to be draft dodgers. The younger of the three, Le Dung, later tells Crowe that the two older ones are actually VC who have been making mines and booby traps.

Caputo's sun-tanning is reminiscent of his more leisurely days in Okinawa. When Crowe, however, confronts him with news about the three Viet Cong who were found a couple of weeks ago, he is jolted back into the constant necessity of remaining alert to those around him—a pain that he did not need to endure when he was in Japan. The deception committed by two out of the three men whom the marines found a few weeks before makes it seem as though they can trust no one in Vietnam, and that anyone in the country, even in South Vietnam, could be a potential enemy.

Caputo asks why Crowe did not capture the two men and bring them in. Crowe says that McCloy already cleared them. Caputo calls HQ with Crowe's report, dreading the lecture he thinks he will get from Captain Neal. Neal has lost about thirty percent of his men in the past month, and C Company's kill ratio is below standard. He wants bodies. He tells Caputo that he is not aggressive enough in his pursuit of the Viet Cong. Neal even adopts a policy saying that any marine who kills a confirmed VC will be given an extra beer ration and time to drink it. However, McCloy answers the phone and is the one to ask why Crowe did not bring the VC in. Murph says that he will pass the info to battalion S-2. Caputo knows that the intelligence will merely end up in a file cabinet.

In Caputo's new battalion, bodies are still measured in terms of tally marks. Neal is worried about his battalion underperforming in the war because this could hurt his chances of getting a promotion. He no longer thinks simply in terms of defeating the enemy but in terms of collecting "bodies," which could include those of South Vietnamese people whom the marines choose to identify as Viet Cong.

Only a month remains in Caputo's tour of Vietnam, and he hopes to leave alive and in one piece. Caputo recognizes how the war has dehumanized him and other marines. He remembers how McKenna shot an old woman in the chest after she had accidentally spat some betel-nut juice in his face. McKenna admits that he doesn't feel guilty about it. Caputo's thoughts and feelings are jumbled. His only clear thought is retaliation. He decides that he's going to get the two VC whom Crowe did not bring in. If they resist, the patrol will kill them. That way, Neal will get his bodies.

Caputo recognizes that the killing is now arbitrary, and that no punishment comes to marines who shoot civilians. This emboldens him to go after the young men whom Crowe identified, even though they were cleared by McCloy as civilians. He is still tied to the idea of doing something heroic by bringing in the young men who thought that they could fool the Americans and continue to mount an offensive against them.

Caputo organizes Allen, Crowe, Lonehill, and two other riflemen that night. They wear bush hats and blacken their faces with shoe polish. He tells Allen, the patrol leader, to go into town and get the VC then bring them back. If he has any problems, he is to kill them. Caputo quietly wants the VC to die and hopes that Allen will find some excuse to kill them. Allen smiles in response to Caputo's order, as though reading his quiet desire. The patrol leaves and then calls in a short time later: they have killed one of the VC and captured the other. Caputo calls Neal, who congratulates them.

The soldiers' preparations are elaborate. They camouflage themselves to resemble the threatening figures in the bush who have haunted them throughout the war. Caputo does not want to take the duplicitous young men prisoner but instead wants to ensure that they get killed so that he can exact the revenge that he desires. Neal is satisfied because they have avoided future mine attacks and collected more bodies.

The five patrolmen arrive back with the body, and Caputo examines it. The back of the man's head was blown out. There are no documents on him, and nothing to prove that he was VC. Caputo turns to Crowe and asks if he is sure that this is one of the men whom Le Dung pointed out. He says "yes," but he looks away. Caputo asks why they shot him, and Allen says that the man whipped a branch in his face. It seems that the men are covering for themselves. Caputo tells them that, if anyone asks, they are to say that the two VC walked into their ambush, and that they killed one and captured the other. When the prisoner tried to escape, they shot him. Caputo tells them not to tell anyone that they snatched the dead man out of the village. They all agree to the directive.

One of the men whom Crowe ends up killing is Le Dung. His inability to tell his informant apart from his enemies strongly suggests that he cannot tell the Vietnamese apart. Caputo gets the killings that he quietly wished for and now helps the soldiers stick to a cohesive story that justifies their murder. Though he has technically not conspired to kill the guerrillas, he is helping to obfuscate the circumstances in which they were killed. Still, there is inconsistency from the Marines, which desires the capture of the VC but does not want to be burdened with the responsibility of accidentally targeting a South Vietnamese.

Shortly thereafter, Caputo is sitting in a hut with his defense counsel, Lieutenant Jim Rader. He looks at the calendar. Beneath its pornographic drawing is the date—June 30, 1966. Today, Lance Corporal Crowe is to be tried on two counts of premeditated murder. Caputo will appear as a witness for the prosecution. Then, he will be tried on the same charges by the same prosecutor the next morning. The marines taught the men to kill, encouraged them to kill, and are now going to court-martial them for killing Le Dung and Le Du. Caputo realizes that the marines have to punish him to avoid confronting the moral ambiguity of the war. Meanwhile, the battalion is establishing new permanent positions forward of the old front line. C Company suffers steady losses of men.

The Marine Corps is going to use Caputo and Crowe as scapegoats to distance itself from the fact that it has been encouraging its soldiers to kill with little attention to any rules of engagement. This reveals hypocrisy on the part of the institution, which has failed to acknowledge the unique nature of guerrilla warfare and the particularities of conducting a war in the jungle. Instead of changing itself and training its soldiers to meet the needs of this particular war, the high-ranking officers have abdicated from responsibility.

Caputo is frightened at the prospect of being charged with murder, but he also knows that there is murder in his heart, and that he wanted those Vietnamese men to die. He determines that his feelings are a direct result of what the war has done to him and the other men. He realizes, too, that he lied to the investigating officer: he did tell his patrolmen to stick by their statements. The colonel tells him that the original statement was made under oath and will, therefore, remain on the record. The colonel seems quite pleased with this, for now he has Caputo on another charge.

Caputo honorably takes responsibility for his immoral act. He recognizes the change in himself from a man who goes to war wanting to preserve democracy and fight Communism to one who is bloodthirsty for an enemy that he barely understands. The colonel is pleased because getting Caputo on another charge could benefit his own career and further exempt the Marines from responsibility for Caputo's wrongdoing.

Caputo and Rader have the first of many long interviews. Before they start, Caputo hands Rader a long essay about front-time conditions in a guerrilla war; Rader crumples it up and tells Caputo to stick with the facts. He asks if Caputo ordered an assassination. Caputo says no. He confirms that he gave orders to capture and to kill if necessary. Rader says that this a lawful order in combat. They prepare testimony. Caputo hopes for an acquittal, knowing that what happened to him could have happened to anyone. Besides, the enlisted men have good reputations. While Caputo awaits a verdict, the South Vietnamese begin an intramural war, and General Thi is placed under arrest. Caputo is transferred from the battalion to regimental HQ, where he is assigned as an assistant operations officer. Along with Captain Greer, he goes to interview survivors of a disastrous insurrection in the Vu Gia Valley.

Caputo's narration of the emotional turmoil that led to his action is not of any interest to Rader, who knows that this will also not be of any interest to the Marine Corps. The focus on objectivity fails to account for the subjective and complex conditions that lead to actions as extreme as those of Caputo and the riflemen. While, their actions of capturing and killing are permissible within the context of war, the problem is that Caputo and the other marines did not kill men who are verifiably members of the Viet Cong. The fact that the guerrillas were once cleared makes the Marines vulnerable to accusations of killing civilians.

The insurrection ends on May 25. General Walt sends a message to all Marine units in I Corps, saying that the rebellion has been crushed, and they can look forward to good relations from now on with the South Vietnamese, their fellow comrades-in-arms. A few days later, Caputo is ordered to take part in a parade in honor of a visiting dignitary, and he refuses. Caputo's antiwar sentiments are beginning to take shape, and he lectures others on the futility of the conflict.

Caputo is developing a moral conscience in response to the war. General Walt's conclusion is clearly false but is exactly the kind of message that Caputo would have believed several months before. The message reinforces the United States' self-image as an indomitable power.

Later, Rader tells Caputo that he and Crowe have been found not guilty on all counts. The general is also thinking about dropping charges against the others because Crowe was acquitted. However, Caputo will have to receive a letter of reprimand from the general to avoid court-martial. He agrees, and Rader returns to tell Caputo that he can go home in a week, ten days at the most. Before getting on his plane, Caputo watches the replacement marines arrive. He boards his plane, which is heading toward Okinawa and "freedom from death's embrace."

Caputo witnesses the war machine, which expels him, Crowe, and others and replaces them with fresher, more confident, and obedient soldiers. Watching the new soldiers come through must remind Caputo of how he felt when he first arrived from Okinawa. He is returning to the place from which he came but with a very different outlook on the United States' role in Vietnam.

EPILOGUE

Some years later, in 1975, Caputo is crouched in the second-floor corridor of the Continental Palace Hotel, wondering if the North Vietnamese Army has finally invaded Saigon. He and his colleague from the *Chicago Tribune*, Ron Yates, jog over to the UPI offices. The office is in chaos but the final crisis has not yet arrived. He and Yates go back to the hotel to pack. Caputo takes his things to Nick Proffitt's room, which is two floors below, to avoid the possibility of getting hit by a rocket in his top-floor room. He is twenty-three now and has a wife and two children to support, so he is less inclined to take risks. Caputo still feels attached to the war and wants to see it end, even though he knows it will not conclude in the manner in which he had hoped when he was a soldier.

Caputo's life is very different now. He has become a career-oriented man with a family, but he has also retained the exciting and dangerous life he grew accustomed to as a soldier. Being a foreign correspondent seems to be a compromise between his own desire for adventure and his parents' desire for him to have stability and social status. Ideologically, Caputo remains committed to the idea of the North Vietnamese not winning the war. Their success would signal that his efforts and the deaths of his former comrades had been for naught.

After Caputo is discharged from the Marine Corps in 1967, he briefly joins the antiwar movement and links up with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War. In 1970, he mails his **campaign ribbons** to President Nixon along with a bitter letter explaining his opposition to U.S. policies in former Indochina. The medals are returned to him, along with a brief note saying that the Executive Branch is not authorized to receive or hold military decorations, and that Caputo's views have been noted and brought to the attention of the proper authorities.

Caputo's gesture signals a reversal of his previous view in which he saw joining the Marines and going to war as a path to glory. Caputo sent Nixon his campaign ribbons as part of an effort to reinvent himself as an antiwar activist, though his attachment to the Marines and other soldiers made it difficult to critique the institution.

On April 29, 1975, a report comes in from the American Embassy around 10:30 P.M., saying that North Vietnamese have overtaken Tan Son Nhut airport and have moved into Saigon. Marine helicopters evacuate people and tell them to leave their luggage, for there is no additional room. The evacuees look at the wreckage from a South Vietnamese cargo plane, six thousand feet below them. Caputo thinks back to ten years before, when he and other marines marched into Vietnam, confident and idealistic. Now, that optimism is gone, their morals corrupted, and the purpose forgotten. The helicopter lands on the U.S.S. Denver. Caputo greets a marine from the 9th Expeditionary Brigade, the same unit with which he first landed in Da Nang. The next day, the ship's captain announces that the Saigon government has surrendered to the North Vietnamese. The war is over.

The North Vietnamese's seizure of the airport is reminiscent of the mission of Caputo's battalion—to protect their airfield. The South Vietnamese's failure to protect their airport leaves them vulnerable to a takeover and makes it difficult for anyone to escape, except on foot. Caputo knows that the soldiers who fought with him ten years ago no longer have the illusions that inspired them to go to Vietnam in the first place. They now realize that their government was dishonest with them about the reasons for going to war, and that this conclusion in Vietnam was inevitable due to the West's inability to understand why the North Vietnamese were fighting.

POSTSCRIPT

It took Caputo as long to write *A Rumor of War* as it did the United States to fight the Vietnam War. He works on the memoir sporadically from the spring of 1967 to September 1976. The pressure of working as a foreign correspondent for the Chicago *Tribune*, as well as the feeling of being "too fractured by the war" prevented him from writing his thoughts down coherently. While living in England, he starts reading great British memoirs from World War I, including Siegfried Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*. He realizes that a memoir would be the best form through which to recall Vietnam and "the changes it wrought in cultural and social values."

Caputo models himself less on cinematic tough guys and real-life war heroes and takes inspiration from literature. He is less interested in the façade of a soldier than he is in getting additional context about what inspires men to go to war and how the event changes them. These books help him to better understand his own cultural values and how he used them to justify his actions in Vietnam.

By the fall of 1975, when Caputo is the *Tribune*'s Middle East correspondent in Beirut, he has accumulated a "a mass of notes and sketches but only about fifty pages of manuscript good enough to show someone." He finds an agent, but his next problem is finishing the book while reporting on another war in Lebanon, where he gets shot, suffering serious bullet wounds in his left ankle and right foot, as well as superficial fragment wounds in the back, head, left leg, and right arm. He moves back into his parents' house in Westchester, Illinois, to recuperate. There, he completes the manuscript

Caputo's fortune suddenly changes in Beirut, confirming that surviving a war without any injury is mainly a matter of luck. Caputo suffers a number of obstacles in completing his book. Ironically, he does the very thing that he feared having to do as a younger man: he moves back in with his parents. His return home suggests that he has reconciled himself with his suburban roots and, now with his own family, better understands what his own parents wanted for him.

Caputo's purpose in writing *A Rumor of War* was to make people understand the morally and emotionally ambiguous world in which the soldiers existed. He also wanted them to feel the war—the heat, the mosquitoes, the ambushes—as if they, too, were there. The next objective was to get the readers to ask themselves what they would do if they were there. He also strove toward the universal purpose of writing about war itself and what it means.

For Caputo, the war was mainly a sensory experience. The anxiety of constantly waiting for something to happen, as well as the petty annoyances of avoiding snakes and insects, disrupted Caputo's fantasies of heroism and also disrupt the reader's expectation that war entails constant action.

A Rumor of War is published in May 1977 and becomes an immediate sensation. Caputo is besieged by radio, TV, and print interviewers. Despite achieving success, he feels guilty, as though he were profiting from the deaths of his brothers in arms. He begins to suffer from panic attacks during a nationwide book tour. To calm down, he drinks excessively and smokes too much marijuana. He has a nervous collapse and spends several days in the psychiatric ward of an East Coast hospital. Caputo says that he did not write his memoir as a form of therapy but thinks that it and the other books about the war have been therapeutic for a wounded nation. He remains in awe of the fascination that Vietnam continues to hold for people—not only those who fought in or against it, but also those who were not yet born when Saigon fell.

Caputo quickly became the voice of veterans, which is a role that gave him a great deal of anxiety. Though he only sought to describe war as he related to it, his experience of the war became emblematic. Caputo fit the image of the war veteran with which both conservatives and liberals identified. His upbringing in middle-class white suburbia, his university education, and his choice to enlist, as opposed to being drafted, made him someone who would seem least likely to oppose the war. He was also someone who benefited most from the democratic and capitalist values that the United States hoped to maintain abroad.

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