

IF I DIE IN A
COMBAT ZONE

Box Me Up and Ship Me Home

TIM O'BRIEN

“One of the best, most disturbing, and most powerful books about the shame that was/is Vietnam.”

—*Minneapolis Star and Tribune*

“Its effect is as devastating as if its author had been killed. But he survived. So, through such writing, may the American language.”

—*Times* (London)

“A genuine memoir in the full literary sense of that term, and a work that quickly established itself among Vietnam narratives as an exemplar of the genre.... It recalls the depictions of men at war by Whitman, Melville, Crane, and Hemingway; and it stands at the same time in the central tradition of American spiritual autobiography as well, the tradition of Edwards and Woolman, of Franklin and Thoreau and Henry Adams.”

—Philip D. Beidler, *American Literature and the Experience of Vietnam*

“O’Brien writes with pain and passion on the nature of war and its effect on the men who fight in it. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* may, in fact, be the single greatest piece of work to come out of Vietnam, a work on a level with World War Two’s *The Naked and the Dead* and *From Here to Eternity!*”

—*Washington Star*

“O’Brien brilliantly and quietly evokes the foot soldier’s daily life in the paddies and foxholes, evokes a blind, blundering war.... Tim O’Brien writes with the care and eloquence of someone for whom communication is still a vital possibility.... It is a beautiful, painful book, arousing pity and fear for the daily realities of a modern disaster.”

—Annie Gottlieb, *New York Times Book Review*

“What especially distinguishes it is the intensity of its sketches from the infantry, an intensity seldom seen in journalistic accounts of the war.”

—Michael Casey, *America*

“An admirable book by an admirable man ... a finely tuned, almost laconic account of soldiers at work.”

—*Playboy*

“A controlled, honest, well-written account ... Mr. O’Brien is educated, intelligent, reflective, and thoroughly nice—all qualities that make his a convincing voice.”

—*The New Yorker*

“It’s a true writer’s job, gaining strength by dodging the rhetoric, and must be one of the few good things to come out of that desolating struggle.”

—*Manchester Guardian*

“O’Brien is writing of more than Vietnam.... What O’Brien is writing about is the military, and the feel of war, and cold fear, and madmen. O’Brien does it with a narrative that often is haunting, and as clean as the electric-red path of an M-16 round slicing through the Vietnam dark.”

—*Philadelphia Inquirer*

“A carefully made series of short takes, the honestly limited view of a serious, intelligent young man with a driving wish to be both just and brave. Its persistent tension is between contrary impulses: to fight well or to flee.”

—Geoffrey Wolff, *Esquire*

“It’s a beautiful book dealing with the unbeautiful subject of the Vietnam War.... O’Brien sees clearly and tells honestly. This may prove to be the foot soldier’s best personal account of America’s worst war.”

—*Penthouse*

“I wish Tim O’Brien did not write so beautifully, for he makes it impossible to forget his book. I have read it three times, and years from now it will still have that terrible power to make me remember and to make me weep.”

—Gloria Emerson

Books by Tim O'Brien

If I Die in a Combat Zone

Northern Lights

Going After Cacciato

The Nuclear Age

The Things They Carried

In the Lake of the Woods

Tomcat in Love

If I Die in a Combat Zone

Box Me Up and Ship Me Home

Tim O'Brien

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Names and physical characteristics of persons depicted in this book have been changed.

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lo maggior don che Dio per sua larghezza / fesse creando .../... fu
de la volontà la libertate

—*The Divine Comedy*
Par. V, 19ff.

One Days

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

"Yesterday," I said.

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

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

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

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

Barney laughed. "I tell you one thing," he said. "You think this is bad, just wait till tonight. My God, tonight'll be lovely. I'm digging me a foxhole like a basement."

We lay next to each other until the volley of fire stopped. We didn't bother to raise our rifles. We didn't know which way to shoot, and it was all over anyway.

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

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

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

"Did you count yesterday?"

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

"Well, you should've counted yesterday."

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, but—"

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

It was a hard march and soon enough we stopped the chatter. The day was hot. The days were always hot, even the cool days, and we concentrated on the heat and the fatigue and the simple motions of the march. It went that way for hours. One leg, the next leg. Legs counted the days.

"What time is it?"

"Don't know." Barney didn't look back at me. "Four o'clock maybe."

"Good."

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

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

"Cool."

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

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

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

"I guess. You?"

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

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

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

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

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