

The introductory readings, Obrien's *If I die in a Combat Zone*, Hasford's *The Short-Timers*, Moore's *The Green Berets*, and Obrien's *Going After Cacciato*, all share a common element - fear. An integral part of each story is a sense of fear that helps to intensify the experiences being related by the author; ie make the stories more realistic. Without the use of fear, these stories would lose much of their impact. The entire experience of Vietnam pivots on fear for many of the characters in these stories.

In Obrien's *If I die in a Combat Zone*, the main character struggles to balance his fear with his duty to his country, his town, and himself. "So to bring the conversations to a focus and also to try out in real words my secret fears, I argued for running away," (*Combat*, 29) the character says. He simply is torn between what he feels is a responsibility, and the many parts of his fear. Afraid of not upholding his pride, afraid of dying in a, "[war that] was wrongly conceived and poorly justified," (*Combat*, 29), and crippled by, "Doubts...hedged all this: I had neither the expertise nor the wisdom to synthesize answers..." (*Combat*, 29), the character simply is paralyzed by fear, and because of this, gets on the draftee bus without really having made a decision.

It was an intellectual and physical stand-off, and I did not have the energy to see it to an end. I did not want to be a soldier, not even an observer to war. But neither did I want to upset a peculiar balance between the order I knew, the people I knew, and my own private world. It was not that I valued that order. But I feared its opposite, inevitable chaos, censure, embarrassment, the end of everything that had happened in my life, the end of it all (*Combat*, 34). This quote best illustrates his inability to make that necessary decision, and his failure to overcome his debilitating fear.

In Hasford's *The Short Timers*, fear is an underlying current to much of the segment that we have read. From when the poges say, "Fucking grunts...they're nothing but animals..." (*Short-Timers*, 39) and the Marines' reaction, to the exchange between Joker and Animal Mother when Joker must establish himself as a non-poge, the atmosphere has fear right below the surface emotions. It is important to them to establish that they are not afraid of anything, yet it is easy to see that right beneath that bravado is a fear that someone will call their bluff. All the hard talk, "the baddest of the bad, the leanest of the lean, the meanest of the mean," (*Short-Timers*, 40) is all just this little show, as much for the performer as the audience. Their need for this demonstration of manhood is taken a step further by Cowboy when he talks about taking over squad leader for Crazy Earl, "I'm just waiting for Craze to get wasted. Or maybe he'll just go plain fucking crazy. That's how Craze got to be honcho. Ol' Stark, he was our honcho before Craze. Ol' Supergrunt. Went stark raving. Pretty soon it'll be my turn," (*Short-Timers*, 42). Perhaps it will be Cowboy's turn as squad leader; or is it his chance to, "[go] stark raving,"?

The driving force behind PFC Paul Berlin in Obrien's *Going After Cacciato* is the fear of dying. The exercise involving the booby-traps upsets Berlin because he doesn't understand how the NCO can veto his life without him making any mistakes. "He was a straight-forward, honest, decent sort of guy. He was not dumb. He was not small or weak or ugly. True the war scared him silly, but this was something he hoped to bring under control," (*Cacciato*, 40). Berlin at least is honest enough to realize how much the war scares him, and takes it heart. "He was scared, yes, and confused and lost, and he had no sense of what was expected of him or of what to expect from himself," (*Cacciato*, 41). This delirium stems from the fear - the fear of everything that is so different from his norms.

Moore's *The Green Berets* packages the aspect of fear more as a situational constant than the others. "I felt a sense of quickening excitement as the little eight-place single-engine plane closed on Pan Chau in a hilly section along the Cambodian border," (*Green Berets*, 30). Right from the beginning, we are put on the edge, with a tingle of fear rippling at our senses. The buildup of Sven Kornie's

history only adds the excitement, as anyone with a background like that could only be involved in the most dangerous missions. As the main character is brought to Kornie, we are told by Borst, "We're sure hoping we don't get hit in the next few days. The camp isn't secure yet," (Green Berets, 33). This seems to be said almost flippantly, but the reality of an insecure base is far from a joke, and both the narrator and Borst know this. Towards the end of this selection, Sven says, "Those Vietnamese generals --stupid! Dangerous stupid. Two hundred fifty my best men that sneak-eyed yellow-skinned bastard cops commander take out of here yesterday -- and our big American generals? Politics they play while this camp gets zapped," (Green Berets, 33). The loss of those men obviously is more than a minor annoyance to Kornie, who, from his background, would seem to need extreme measures to have fear.

In all the selections that we were to read, there exists many parallels. Many are superficial, and some go to the core of the Vietnam experience. Following the thread of fear from one story to the next is interesting because the authors use it in so many different ways - but it remains one of the common denominators to all of them. How the characters deal with the fear, and in what context it is described in is a large part of the Vietnam story as a whole, and many of the issues that Vietnam is famous for build almost solely upon the constant fear that pervaded the lives of those there.