

# A rumor of war philip caputo literature review

[Countries](#), [Vietnam](#)



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A Rumor of War by Philip Caputo was first published in 1977 and was immediately acclaimed in many reviews as a superbly written account of one man's experience of the Vietnam War. It will be seen that not only was the Vietnam War, because of a unique set of circumstances, very different in many respects from earlier wars, but also that it had a life-changing effect on Caputo: he departed for the war keen and eager for battle, but returned as a total opponent of the war.

### **According to Caputo, how was the Vietnam War different from earlier wars, such as World War II?**

The Vietnam War, according to Caputo, differed in six major ways from the earlier wars, especially World War II which Caputo frequently refers to. One key difference was the terrain of Vietnam: tangled jungle, muddy swamps, thick forests - it was perfect for the type of tactics employed by the Vietcong and the NVA (the North Vietnamese Army), but had the effect of nullifying the American troops' superiority in arms and weaponry. Furthermore, the climate of the country simply exacerbated the problems caused by the terrain: it was either swelteringly hot or, in the monsoon season swelteringly hot and very wet. Caputo sums up both problems in this quotation:

Everything rotted and corroded quickly over there: bodies, boot leather, canvas, metal, morals. Scorched by the sun, wracked by the wind and rain of the monsoon, fighting in alien swamps and jungles, our humanity rubbed off us as the protective bluing rubbed off the barrels of our rifles. (98)

The American troops were also hampered by not being able to identify the enemy: some South Vietnamese civilians undoubtedly supported the American intervention, but many did not and offered shelter to Vietcong

guerrillas or held arms for the NVA. In his description of an ambush bombing round about Christmas time Caputo comments on this problem:

Just before the platoon resumed its march, someone found a length of electrical detonating cord lying in the grass near the village. The village would have been as likely an ambush site as any: the VC only had to press the detonator and then blend in with the civilians, if indeed there were any true civilians in the village. Or they could have hidden in one of the tunnels under the houses. (234)

As that passage suggests the tactics employed by the Vietcong and the type of warfare they chose to fight against American troops was based on avoiding direct contact with the American forces who could out-gun them.

Therefore, they relied a great deal on ambushes and booby traps, or hit-and-run attacks which left the American troops with no-one to shoot back at.

Caputo refers to the daily toll of casualties caused by this unconventional warfare: " The usual ambushes and booby traps claimed daily victims and the medevac helicopters flew back and forth across the low, drooping skies."

The Christmas ambush bomb also re-enforces the idea that death can come at any time and whether you survive or not is pure chance. Caputo reflects in the aftermath of the ambush bomb:

I had been standing on that very spot, near the tree, not ten seconds before the blast.... Oh God - if I had remained on that spot another ten seconds they would have been picking pieces of me out of the trees. Chance. Pure chance. Allen, right beside me, had been wounded in the head. I had not been hurt, chance. The one true god of modern war is blind chance. " 235)

All these factors lead to something else which came to characterize the

Vietnam War, and seem to have been caused partly by the ruthlessness of the Vietcong, but also by the frustration felt by the American soldiers fighting in such a war. The fighting lost all moral restraint. Caputo writes: " The fighting had not only become more intense, but more vicious. Both we and the Viet Cong began to make a habit of atrocities." (183) Atrocities occur in all wars: Caputo's point is that in Vietnam atrocities, committed by both sides, became an almost daily occurrence. When the bodies of mutilated American soldiers were found, Caputo writes

We paid them back with interest. It was common knowledge that quite a few captured VC never made it to prison camps; they were reported as " shot and killed while attempting to escape." Some line companies did not even bother taking prisoners; they simply killed every VC they saw, and a number of Vietnamese who were only suspects. The latter were usually counted as enemy dead, under the unwritten rule " If he's dead and Vietnamese, he's VC." (208)

### **Caputo explicitly contrasts this behaviour on the battlefield with World War II.:**

We were fighting the cruellest kind of war, a people's war. It was no orderly campaign as in Europe, but a war for survival waged in a wilderness without rules or laws; a war in which each soldier fought for his own life and the lives of the men beside him, not caring who he killed in that personal cause or how many or in what manner and feeling only contempt for those who sought to impose on his savage struggle the mincing distinctions of civilized warfare - that code of battlefield ethics that attempted to humanize an essentially inhuman war. (216)

The final aspect of the war that Caputo identifies is the effect on the morale of the American ground troops. Faced with all the problems detailed above, they quickly lost confidence and did not believe they could win. Caputo comments:

The regiment's mood began to match the weather. We were a long way from the despair that afflicted American soldiers in the closing years of the war, but we had traveled some emotional distance from the cheery confidence of eight months before. The mood was sardonic, fatalistic, and melancholy.

(167)

### **In terms of these specific differences, how did the war change Caputo?**

The experience of fighting in Vietnam changed Caputo in many ways which he writes about with honesty. He went to the war believing that America would win easily and soon loses that rather arrogant assumption:

The discovery that the men we had scorned as peasant guerrillas were, in fact, a lethal, determined enemy and the casualty lists that lengthened each week with nothing to show for the blood being spilled broke our early confidence. (5)

His experience of watching men die and being ambushed by bombs makes him more humble in a sense, more fatalistic, more realistic about the nature of warfare. He himself committed atrocities. After the Christmas ambush bomb this is his reaction to the local village:

All right, I thought, tit for tat. No cease-fire for us, none for you either. I ordered both rocket launcher teams to fire white phosphorous shells into the hamlet. They fired four together.... About half the village went up in flames.

(235)

What Caputo is fulfilling here is a basic desire for revenge and it leaves him brutalized and de-sensitized about what he has done:

I did not feel a sense of vengeance, any more than I felt remorse or regret. I did not even feel angry. Listening to the shouts and the people running out of their burning homes, I did not feel anything at all. (236)

Later, however, through the act of writing about the war and reflecting on his behaviour Caputo did feel enormous remorse over the way he had become brutalized by the war, and began to understand that the conditions of fighting in Vietnam encouraged soldiers on both sides to abandon all ethical standpoints on warfare.

The experience of fighting turned Caputo into an opponent of the war. He describes his attitude to war before he left for Vietnam:

Napoleon once said he could make men die for little pieces of ribbon. By the time the battalion left for Vietnam, I was ready to die for considerably less, for a few favorable remarks in a fitness report. Words. (26)

But when he returns from his tour of duty he attempts to send his medal ribbons back to the government and becomes involved in the anti-war movement.

Caputo also learns to respect the qualities of courage and endurance of the men he commands. This exchange shortly after the end of a heavy bombardment shows his admiration, even affection for his men's good humor:

" You guys all right?" [Caputo asks]

“ Outside of being cold, wet, miserable, hungry and scared... we’re just fine, sir”

“ No casualties?”

“ No, sir. Because I’m black the shells couldn’t see me.”

I laughed to myself thinking, They’re all right, the best you could ask for. They’ve been through a fire-fight and a shelling and they’re making jokes about it. (145)

Ultimately that is one thing that Caputo suggests that all American soldiers gained in Vietnam - a sense of unity and comradeship that they had never felt before:

Two friends of mine died trying to save the corpses of their men from the battlefield. Such devotion, simple and selfless, the sentiment of belonging to each other, was the one decent thing we found in a conflict otherwise notable for its monstrosities. The battlefields of Vietnam were a crucible in which a generation of American soldiers were fused together by a common confrontation with death and a sharing of hardships, dangers, and fears. The very ugliness of the war, the sordidness of our daily lives, the degradation of having to take part in body counts, made us draw still closer to one another. It was as if in comradeship we found an affirmation of life and the means to preserve at least a vestige of our humanity. (306)

For such a positive emotion to emerge from such a barbaric war is an astonishing achievement.

## **Work Cited**

Caputo, Philip. *A Rumor of War*. 1977. New York: Henry Holt. Print.