# Redefining courage in a fantasy: an analysis of going after cacciato

The reality of war unfortunately creates an oppressive system that causes soldiers to struggle with internal conflict and individual thought. In the book Going After Cacciato by Tim O'Brien, Paul Berlin's thoughts and emotions are presented fluidly in the observation post as he accepts ideas of leaving the war as a means of embracing courage. Although war is often known for violence and gore, Berlin's thoughts at the observation post show his probable battle with masculinity and courage.

Within O'Brien's narrative, the culture that war fosters amplifies American values of pride and honor into masculine behavior. This creates an internally oppressive system in which soldiers associate fighting for their country with suppressing their emotions and rejecting fear. Paul Berlin's character development of becoming brave and desiring peace is prevalent encourages that he is having a plausible war experience. His contemplation of leaving the war is seen as: " That was the crazy thing about it – for all the difficulties, for all the hard times and stupidity and errors, for all that, it could truly be done" (O'Brien 48). Although fantasy and reality struggle to coexist in war, Berlin has found a realistic balance in considering and accepting the possibility that leaving " could truly be done". His use of controlled fantasy to deal with trauma exemplifies his credible war experience. His realization of rationalizing peace is realistic since it does not go without intense feelings of fear and deep introspection that eventually leads to courage. The emotional standards of war such as bravery and loyalty are what show the plausibility of Berlin's thought process and restrict him from embracing fantasy.

War puts such immense pressure on Berlin to express masculinity that his idealized version of himself as a soldier cannot even exist in reality. True

expressions of bravery for Berlin either must be redefined to fit into the mold of reality, or completely fictionalized in his mind. This reality is exemplified when Berlin leaves his fellow soldiers that he is supposed to be guarding and goes down the ladder of the post. O'Brien writes: " It was his bravest moment" (O'Brien 62). This is an accurate example of war culture since it took bravery for Berlin to stray away from a group he was supposed to sacrifice his individuality for. In reflection, he can identify this as his bravest moment, since he is able to remove himself from the narrative of an idealized soldier and redefine the confines of bravery enforced by American culture. As his mental state deteriorates, the shift in his concept of true bravery is seen clearly through the arc of his fantasy.

When Berlin leaves the group and begins to explore the idea of leaving the war, his emotional state is described as: " Excited by the possibilities, but still in control" (O'Brien 63). In a sharp contrast to O'Brien's descriptions of Berlin's journey to Paris, Berlin is shown here by being in control of his fantasies with a real grasp on time, location, and his being. He is seeing leaving war as brave, and has not yet experienced the guilt that eventually destroys him. Furthermore, beyond attempting to balance fantasy and reality, he also grapples with his masculinity which shows he is aware and reacting to the reality of war expectations. O'Brien writes: "…that somewhere inside each man is a biological center for the exercise of courage" (O'Brien 81). Berlin believes that masculinity and courage are interdependent, a concept strongly encouraged by the military. His acute awareness of military and social standards demonstrate the credibility of the scenes. What is dangerous here for Berlin, is that courage has been explicitly

defined by American culture. When he tries to redefine courage for himself, even his fantasies cannot withstand what has been ingrained in him for so long. Reality constantly threatens the stability of his fantasies where his concepts and viewpoints do not fit into what he has been conditioned to believe.

War creates a dangerous circumstance for fantasy and reality to coexist, especially because of expectations of masculinity and courage. War deters individual thought and imagination which actually causes the going against of a group think mindset to be one of the bravest things a soldier can do. Embracing individuality in United States's troops has been struck down from sexuality to gender and claims of false loyalty are being used against those who strive for true self expression. This oppression forces soldiers to rely on fantasy to relieve their trauma which is dangerous and an ineffective way to properly treat PTSD. Paul Berlin has been forced to exist in a devastating reality in which the courage expected of him is impossible to achieve, and even in his fantasies cannot be redefined.