

Fear and duty in going after cacciato essay



Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* might be set during the Vietnam war, but at its core it is a novel about fear. The main character, soldier Paul Berlin, is completely motivated, controlled, and surrounded by fear. When Paul Berlin first arrives at the war he feels annoyed by the derision he receives from his superiors but at the same time admits that “..

. the war scared him silly, but this was something he hoped to bring under control” (O'Brien 38). This statement sets in motion the events and thoughts that dominate the entirety of the book. Paul Berlin realizes that in order to be happy he must control his fear. However, his fears do not simply extend to the natural fears of war and dying. As he gushes out in the final pages of the book, Paul Berlin fears running away, going into exile, the thoughts of those he loves, the loss of reputation, and most of all cowardice. Paralyzed by fear, Paul Berlin can do little more than go through the motions of the war; walking from place to place, playing basketball, observing the other soldiers. While floating through his tour, he struggles with the sense that his actions have no affect on his world and life.

Finally, in one action, Paul Berlin manages to affect the outcome of his time in Vietnam by killing his commanding officer, a good man by the name of Sidney Martin. Haunted by the memory of these actions, he can barely come to describe the events, going up to the point where he agrees to kill the lieutenant before skipping away to another topic. Torn apart by the knowledge of what he has done he ponders over what his duty entails and how he can be happy. To answer these questions, Paul Berlin imagines a fantasy in which he and his squad mates travel the world chasing down Cacciato, essentially deserting the war and going to Paris. Paul Berlin uses his

fantasy of going after Cacciato to discover for himself how to deal with his own fear and find inner peace by exploring his own sense of helplessness, the consequences of desertion, and the duty of a soldier. When Paul Berlin first reaches the war he is overcome with a sense that there is nothing he can do to try and keep himself alive or do anything at all to change the course that his life has taken. O'Brien exemplifies this feeling in the chapter "How They Were Organized" when he describes a corporal giving a lecture on how to survive that consists of him sitting on the ground saying nothing which demonstrates how little one could do to survive. On a more personal level Paul Berlin has the feeling of helplessness reinforced during the land mine drill.

"The supervising NCO simply hollered Boomo when the urge struck him" (O'Brien 40). Here Paul Berlin feels that he can't do anything to change his fate, just as he can't do anything to avoid the "mines". Paul Berlin craves a focus, a purpose as evidenced by his love of playing basketball with his squad. "Winning- you knew the score, you knew what it would take to win, to come from behind, you knew exactly..

. you had a true thing to aim at, you always knew" (O'Brien 109). In this excerpt Berlin shows how he longs for some sort of clear goal, as contrasted with the mindless wandering around Vietnam in a war that he doesn't care about or understand. In his fantasy, Paul Berlin satisfies this goal with the chase after Cacciato. However, when they reach Paris, Berlin admits to himself that he simply wanted to run from the fighting when he and Sarkin try and settle down and forget about Cacciato. But when he tries to settle down, he soon feels the tug of duty pulling him back to the chase. He

dreams of a goal that will take him away from the war without leaving himself purposeless.

This goal proves more complex than he first thinks, On the road to Paris, the ideas and consequences of desertion plague Berlin and his squad mates. First they meet the Viet Cong major who has been put into the tunnels to punish him for desertion. He cries in anguish “ Ten years, and for what? What? ” (O’Brein 96) saying out loud one of Paul’s fears that deserting the war will only result in punishment harsher than that of the war. Later Captain Rhallon expresses another one of Berlin’s worries; that the world will look down on him for deserting.

Rhallon takes this to the extreme when he says “ Deserters, they must be punished to the very ends of the earth. Hunted down like dogs” (O’Brein 200). Finally, the group is captured and sentenced to death for the crime of desertion. Their capture was inevitable since they tried to get through many countries with simple lies and hand waving. But he doesn’t want the story to end here, Berlin manages to force himself to imagine that incredibly Cacciato came back for them and freed them. In Paris he feels finally at rest but even there, thousands of miles from Vietnam or the United States, he worries over how to deal with the fact that they deserted the war.

At the end of the night, Paul Berlin still literally cannot imagine a world in which he faces no consequences for running away from the war. Even if he could somehow dodge the blowback from fleeing the war, Paul Berlin cannot shake the feeling that he could somehow affect the war, despite knowing that he cannot. During his training Paul Berlin thinks to himself that “ He was

a straightforward, honest, decent sort of guy. He was not dumb. We was not small or weak or ugly" (O'Brein 38).

In this section he clearly demonstrates that he does not lack self confidence, but when presented with the chance to make a difference he knows that he cannot. On the long march to the battle, Sidney Martin tells the men that if the fight well, fewer men will be killed. Rather than take this statement as an opportunity, he thinks to himself that he will not fight well because he has no mission or purpose, despite the fact that he amazes himself by continuing to climb in the face of defeat. This inner power to go on is what makes Paul Berlin feel as if he has something to contribute, which shows itself in Paul Berlin's lack of a nickname.

Berlin explains how nicknames make it easier for soldiers to keep their distance from each other. But Berlin has the opposite of a nickname, throughout the novel he is referred to by his complete first and last names and sometimes his rank. In his fantasy, he tries to make himself just another soldier by giving himself a nickname. The nickname, Spec Four, is given to him by Sarkin and makes him blend in with the rest of the soldiers. However, at the end of the journey when Sark says to him " Spec Four, you have the alternatives. It's time to choose. " Paul Berlin cannot think of a way in which he could abandon his obligations, as he says " It was a failure of imagination" (O'Brein 313). At the end of his story and at the end of his night at the observation post Paul Berlin reaches a conclusion.

In a finally debate between himself and Sarkin, Berlin finally realizes what it is he must do to be happy. He decides that despite all of the pontificating

about a soldier's duty and all of his fears of battle, the only way he can truly find inner peace is by simply finishing his tour with the Army and doing his job. He discovers that putting all politics and morality aside, he simply has a debt to pay. Above all else, he fears what will happen if he abandons those debts and he knows that if were to abandon them, he will never be able to find the inner peace that Sarkin promises.

This conclusion solves all of the issues he grappled with. His own helplessness will not matter since all that he is required to do is fulfill his obligation and doing that will a goal to work towards, he is in Vietnam simply to win the war, nothing else. Clearly not deserting the army resolves the issues of the consequences of desertion.

Finally, he realizes that the duty of a soldier is not to fight well, or to be a hero, but simply to follow orders and do their job.