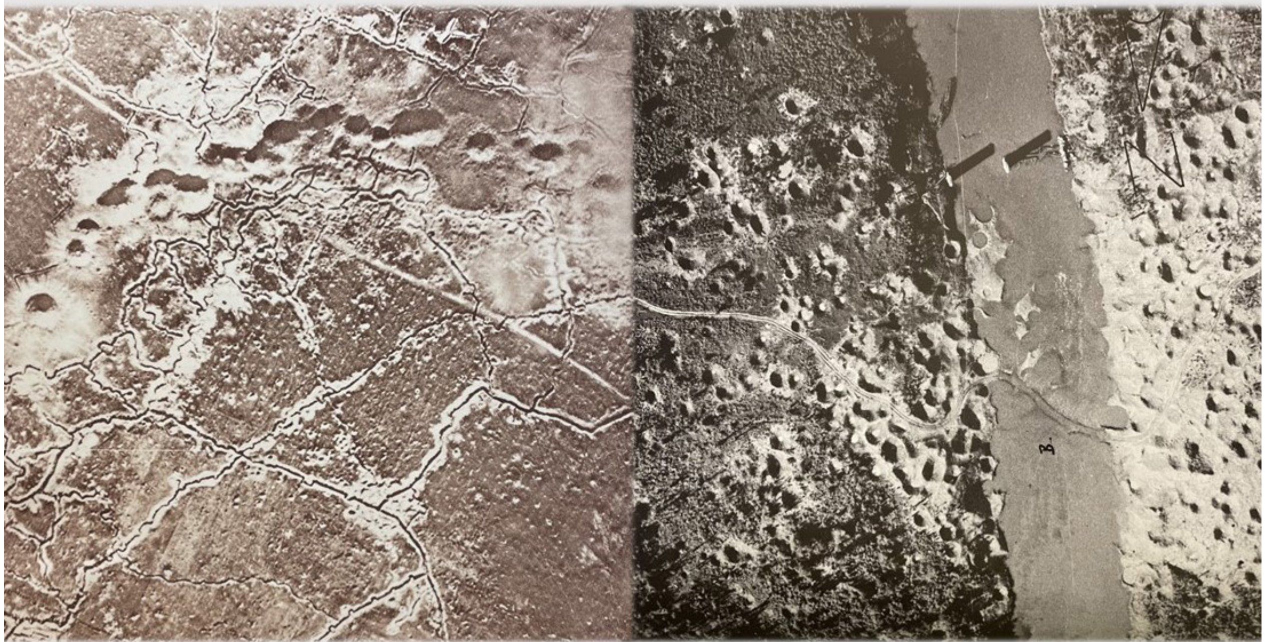
AND THE WAR WENT ON

Soldiers, Memory, and Literature of The Great War and Vietnam



Left: Mine/artillery craters and trench networks at La Bassée, France, May, 1916. From: Edmund Blunden's Minute Book, Edmund Blunden Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Right: Artillery/bomb craters on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, Vietnam, 1969. From: U.S. Air Force, found in Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, The Vietnam War: An Intimate History, 379.

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Senior Thesis in History

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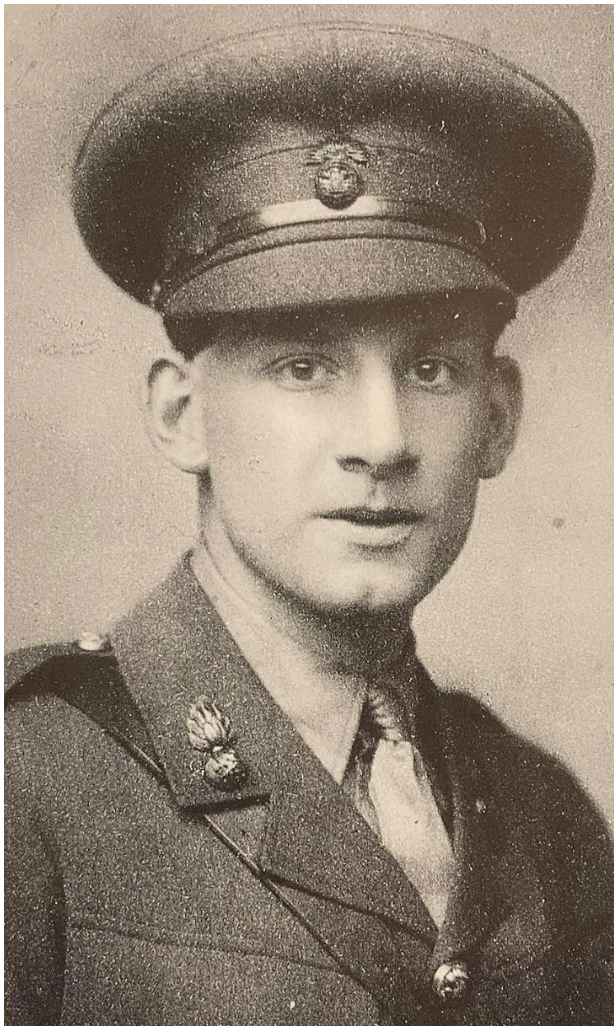
Just eaten my last orange. I am looking at a sunlit picture of Hell.

— SIEGFRIED SASSOON, *Diaries: 1915-1918*

Tim O'Brien in Vietnam, c.1969-1970. From: Box 27, Folder 7, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.



Siegfried Sassoon, c. 1916. From: Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Poet *by Jean Moorcroft Wilson*

This isn't civilization. This is Nam.

— TIM O'BRIEN, *The Things They Carried*

A NOTE ON MEMORY

MEMORY CAN BE HISTORY, BUT HIstory also elapses into memory. Consider this evolution as an equation. An event occurs in its historical moment, and to this moment one adds the basic variable of time. The product is a remembered version of historical events. The addition of other variables—politics, narrative, censorship, or trauma, for instance—further alters the memory product. Put another way, historical memory might be viewed as a reproduction of historical events which has been sketched, chiseled, and sanded by a human hand, rather than copied directly using an exact mold. The likeness is evident, but the product remains distinct from the original object.

The study of memory has developed two umbrella categories: individual memory and collective memory. Individual memory comprises first-hand experiences, personal history, and reflections of one's own past. Collective memory belongs to a group, such as a nation, an institution, or a public audience. The collective group shares in an experience of or relationship to the past, regardless of the strength of each individual's connection to events themselves. Individual memory is found in a son's eulogy at his father's funeral, whereas collective memory is found in the monuments to Confederate dead which glorify Secession. Individual memory writes a Holocaust survivor's memoir, but collective memory builds Yad Vashem.[1]

In soldier-authored war literature, personal memory emerges as the dominant strand of individual memory. Personal memory refers, here, to the individual soldier's recollection of *his own* war. It includes his personal experiences of combat, and reflects on the particular points in the war that he interacted with directly. National public memory emerges as the dominant strand of collective memory, referring to the conceptualization of war held by a nation, its government, and its populace. It serves as the collective understanding of a war constructed by both soldiers who fought and civilians who did not. National public memory drives the way the nation, its people, and its institutions shape their story of war, fitting it within a national legacy and adopting particular versions of history as national historical truth. Through public consumption of soldier-authored war literature, personal memory can become part of national public memory. Those two memories can also differ significantly from one another.

Once memory exits the interior mind and enters the public arena, it can be praised, questioned, contested, adopted, or even hijacked. Because war is a contentious subject, war memory is especially susceptible to these pressures. What people think about a war carries social and political implications that place an immense burden of significance on the way a war is remembered.[2] War memory, much like war itself, is therefore volatile and embattled. This is the reality soldier-authors face when they take their personal memory of combat, put it on paper, and offer it to a public audience largely uninitiated in the ways of war.

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1 This distinction between individual and collective memory is articulated in varying ways across the field of memory studies, and a review of key memory studies texts distills them into the two predominant strains of memory. A clear and concise differentiation can be found in Professor David W. Blight's writings on memory, particularly the introduction to *Beyond the Battlefield*, which helped formulate this paper's approach to memory as a historical subject. On memory studies and the subjects of individual and collective memory, also see: Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Use and Abuse of History*, trans. Adrian Collins (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1976); Maurice Halbwachs, *The Collective Memory*, trans. Francis J. Ditter, Jr. and Vida Yazdi Ditter, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1980); Jeffrey K. Olick, "Collective Memory: The Two Cultures," *Sociological Theory*, 17, no. 3 (November 1999), 333-348; Jan-Werner Müller, *Memory & Power in Post-War Europe: Studies in the Presence of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire," Representations, 26 (Spring 1989), 7-24; Pascal Boyer and James V. Wertsch, ed., *Memory in Mind and Culture*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Jeffrey K. Olick, Vered Vinitzky-Seroussi, Daniel Levy, ed., *The Collective Memory Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

2 *"…on the way a war is remembered."*: Steinbeck once wrote that "in ancient Greece it was said that there had to be a war at least every twenty years because every generation of men had to know what it was like. With us, we must forget, or we could never indulge in the murderous nonsense again." (John Steinbeck, *Once There Was a War* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 1).

PROLOGUE

THE PAPER, COLORED A MUTED yellow-green, appears formal, even administrative. It does not look like the kind of paper a 20-year-old boy would use to bare his heart and soul. Yet, on line three of this starkly impersonal legal pad, a young Josh White began his heartbreaking letter to renowned soldier-author Tim O'Brien. "Well this is it," White offered, "my sometimes twisted hope is only a letter away. I'm writing you in the hopes of filling a long deep hole inside me."[3]

Almost thirty years earlier, in the dense jungles of Vietnam, O'Brien served under Lieutenant Mark "Mad Mark" White. Mark was "universally respected – even loved" among the men of Alpha Company. "He was extremely cool under fire," O'Brien noted, "very quiet and collected, a good disciplinarian without ever being nasty or tyrannical about it." Mark, who was "lean, tall, tireless, and physically strong," seemed to walk through the war afraid of nothing. His nickname, earned rather than given, came from his habit of "taunting the Grim Reaper." Mark's "fatalistic cynicism" made him seem suited to–even relieved by–the brutality of war. Still, he was never careless with the lives of his men, often taking personal responsibility for the most dangerous tasks.[4]

Mark returned from Vietnam, started college, and made the dean's list his first semester. Something, though, began to slip. He battled addiction and turned violent. He bounced between mental hospitals, health clinics, and various jobs. Things seemed to change in October, 1974, when Mark and his wife welcomed a son, Josh. He found a job as a cook, his life turning a corner for the better. Then, on April 30th, 1975, Lt. Mark White left his wife and infant son, checked into a hotel room, and took his own life.[5]

O'Brien had both served with Mark and written about him in his early war memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. Josh explained that reading O'Brien's stories was difficult, but formed part of his effort to understand his father through memories held by friends and relatives. He wrote to O'Brien, ironically, from Fort Bragg, N.C., having enlisted in the 82nd Airborne Division. It was a "spur of the moment" decision, and though Josh told his mother that he enlisted for the money and the "adventure," both knew that was a lie. "I did it to find Mad Mark," Josh admitted. "I have this idea, that if I taste a little, see a little, and just experience a little, just enough of the hell, I'll be at peace." Josh's letter to O'Brien was a desperate, overwhelming plea for answers about who his father had been. At the bottom of the page, beneath his signature and his return address, Josh White wrote one final, simple line: "he haunts me too."[6]

When Josh's letter arrived, O'Brien already knew about Mark's suicide. Six years earlier, Mark's brother, Thomas, recognized Mark's character in *If I Die* and also wrote to O'Brien about his brother's memory. Though it is unclear whether O'Brien responded to Thomas, he did respond to Josh. In his letter, O'Brien recounted stories from his time in Vietnam with Mark, using them to characterize what Mark was like as an officer and a man. He recalled minor details of Mark's persona—how he used a shotgun rather than an M-16, for instance. O'Brien emphasized that overall Mark was a respected, competent, brave leader who inspired awe among his men, despite his flaws. O'Brien ended, however, with the memory of "one evening…sitting around a foxhole as dusk was settling in. Your father was saying that he didn't know what he would do with himself once the war was over." O'Brien recalled how "it struck me that Vietnam was the pinnacle of Mark's life – that for him everything afterward would seem unchallenging and commonplace. And maybe that's finally what happened – who knows?" O'Brien seemed to recognize that his responsibility was to convey, or

3 Josh White to Tim O'Brien, Nov. 21, 1994, Box 4, Folder 5, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

4 Tim O'Brien to Josh White, Jan. 7, 1995, Box 4, Folder 5, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin ; Details about Mark White's life after Vietnam are taken from: Thomas White to Tim O'Brien, July 5, 1988, Box 23, Folder 8, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

5 Details about Mark White's life after Vietnam are taken from: Thomas White to Tim O'Brien, July 5, 1988, Box 23, Folder 8, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

6 Josh White to Tim O'Brien, Tim O'Brien Papers.

rather to illustrate, the true Mad Mark. To do right by Josh, O'Brien shared his unfiltered memory, even if it presented an uncomfortable reality to accept.[7]

Three-quarters of a century earlier, a different group of individuals grappled with the same challenge of understanding and conveying the memory of someone lost to a brutal war. On November 4th, 1918, one week before the Armistice, English soldier-poet Wilfred Owen was killed while leading his men across the Sambre Canal in northern France. Quiet and thoughtful, Wilfred was devoted to his mother and inspired by the power of the written word. Having published only five poems (two anonymously), he was largely unknown beyond family and friends at the time of his death. Posthumously, however, Wilfred gained international renown as one of the finest war poets to ever live, embodying the voice of the young generation destroyed by the First World War. This was largely thanks to efforts by Siegfried Sassoon and Edmund Blunden, themselves widely read and respected literary figures and war writers. In editing and publishing Wilfred's poetry, Sassoon and Blunden were responsible for introducing Wilfred's poetic voice and impressions of war to the postwar world.[8]

Efforts to reconstruct Wilfred's life and do justice to his memory put Sassoon and Blunden in frequent communication with Wilfred's mother Susan, his brother Harold, and eventually with each other. Susan, in particular, focused on the details of remembering her son properly. She worried over which portrait would be best suited to the collection, and insisted that Wilfred's poetry be bound in purple, his favorite color. "It must be the right 'purple,'" she stipulated, "or not at all." The construction of Wilfred's legacy was not solely Susan's concern. Sassoon, who had met Wilfred at Craiglockhart War Hospital and formed a deep personal and working bond with the young poet, was determined to pay proper homage to Wilfred's poetic genius while still spotlighting his clear disdain of war. Sassoon's efforts were guided by his desire to capture the literary power and endearing personality of his close friend, a man of "physical toughness and intellectual determination" who nevertheless managed to convey a true sensitivity of emotion in his poetry. Working on Wilfred's collections prompted Sassoon to "[call] him back in memory," and he was "haunted by the idea of the unalterable features of those who have died in youth." Just as Josh White, Thomas White, and Tim O'Brien would do with Mark White decades later, Sassoon, Blunden, Harold, and Susan traded memories of the man they had lost, hoping to construct a shape of Wilfred on the page that would approximate his true self.[9]

Poets like Sassoon, Owen, and Blunden responded in their work to the apocalyptic event that was WWI. At the beginning of the 20th century, Europe committed what is often aptly referred to as collective suicide. Growing international tensions born from the volatile combination of imperialism, nationalism, and militarism transformed Europe into a geopolitical powder keg. The assassination of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June, 1914 was the equivalent of lighting a match. Austria blamed Serbia for the assassination and declared war, triggering alliances across Europe and eventually dividing much of the globe. From 1914 to 1918, the mass industrialized slaughter then known as the Great War killed over 20 million people, buried a generation of young men, and dug enough trench lines to circle the Earth. What was envisioned in summer, 1914, as a small conflict that would "be over

7 Tim O'Brien to Josh White, Tim O'Brien Papers.

8 For biographical information on Wilfred Owen, see: Siegfried Sassoon's introduction to Wilfred Owen, Poems, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920); Edmund Blunden's introduction ("memoir") to Wilfred Owen, The Poems of Wilfred Owen, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969); Dominic Hibberd, Wilfred Owen: A New Biography, (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2002); "Wilfred Owen: 1893-1918," Poetry Foundation.

9 Susan Owen to Edmund Blunden, n.d., Box 67, Folder 8, Edmund Blunden Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; Owen knew of Sassoon before the latter arrived at Craiglockhart, having read his initial war poetry. It took Owen a while to work up the courage to approach him, though he described the excitement of Sassoon's presence in letters to his mother. Owen was invigorated by the idea of engaging with someone who also saw poetry as a valuable antiwar medium, and once he finally introduced himself, the two men shared in an intimate exchange of personal and literary influence. Sassoon published some of his own poetry in the hospital literary magazine, *The Hydra*, which Owen edited. Owen credited Sassoon with transforming his identity as a poet. Each was troubled by the other's return to the front, and Sassoon mourned Owen's death deeply, describing it even years later as a "chasm in my private existence." (Siegfried Sassoon, Siegfried's Journey, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1945), 72); Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey*, 63.

by Christmas" quickly devolved into a murderous stalemate exemplifying how unprepared mankind was for modern, mechanized warfare. With the signing of the Armistice in November, 1918, empires collapsed, maps were redrawn, and those who had survived the chaos of the previous four years returned home certain of only the fact that the world was a newly uncertain place.[10]

Almost fifty years later, the world was again reminded that WWI had been far from the end of all warfare. Beginning in the 1950s, against the backdrop of the Cold War, North Vietnam and South Vietnam fought a protracted civil war over the unification of the country under communism. The United States, primed by domino theory and dedicated to containment, supported South Vietnam with economic aid, military advisers, training, and equipment. Despite mounting American support, the South Vietnamese struggled against the communist insurgency. President Kennedy warily increased the number of American military personnel in Vietnam in 1961. By 1965, President Johnson authorized the first American combat operations. A gruesome and bloody guerilla war followed, characterized by growing U.S. troop commitments but very little discernible progress. The fervor of American domestic antiwar protest grew, especially in response to the draft. For the next eight years, U.S. soldiers fought and died in the name of containing communism and securing Vietnamese self-determination, but moved closer to neither goal. When the United States finally withdrew its forces in March, 1973, it counted more than 250,000 casualties, including over 58,000 deaths, with nothing significant to show for the losses. Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese communists two years later, ending a war that had cost, in total, nearly 2.5 million lives. This was the conflict out of which O'Brien began to write.[10]

Both WWI and Vietnam sparked notable postwar literary movements, particularly among former soldiers. Combat veterans often turned to fiction, memoir, and poetry to explore their own thoughts and feelings about war, or to expose those at home to the reality of the fighting. These postwar stories reveal that a close, complex relationship exists between history, memory, and literature. They also suggest that war memory, especially that of war's participants, is critical to any construction of war history. It is the powerful and persistent memory of combat that compels a soldier to write the history of his war, even when he feels the experience is all but ineffable.

An analysis of soldier-authored literature from WWI and Vietnam lands, rather naturally, on the two keystone figures of Siegfried Sassoon and Tim O'Brien. Full of eager, early belief in the war effort, Sassoon enlisted on August 4th, 1914—the day Britain declared war on Germany. He became an officer in the Royal Welch Fusiliers shortly thereafter. Sassoon was, by all accounts, a brilliant leader, brave on the battlefield and well-loved by his men. Twice wounded, he won the Military Cross for gallantry and earned the nickname "Mad Jack" for his occasionally crazed trench action. Despite his skill as an officer, Sassoon's initial enthusiasm quickly crumbled to disillusion once he met with the reality of war. Already a dabbling poet, Sassoon turned his literary attention to the waste and carnage surrounding him. His first collection of war poetry, *The Old Huntsman*, was published in 1917. His second, *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, followed in 1918. Both widely and positively reviewed, his poetry launched Sassoon to fame almost instantly. He was lauded as one of the few "realist" voices willing to expose the true nature of the trenches. His notoriety grew in July, 1917, when he published "A Soldier's Declaration." The protest statement, released publicly and read aloud in the House of Commons, expressed Sassoon's condemnation of the British government's prosecution of the war and argued that British soldiers were dying

10 *"…enough trench lines to circle the Earth."*: Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 37; For general history about WWI, see: Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory;* Jay M. Winter and Blaine Baggett, *1914-1918: The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century,* (London: BBC Books, 1996); John Keegan, *The First World War*, (New York: Vintage, 2000); "How The World Went To War In 1914," Imperial War Museum (online).

11 For general history about the Vietnam War, see: Max Hastings, *Vietnam: An Epic Tragedy, 1945-1975,* (New York: Harper Collins, 2018); Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History*, (New York: Penguin, 1997); Geoffrey C. Ward and Ken Burns, *The Vietnam War: An Intimate History*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2017); *Part VIII: The Vietnam War in The Routledge Handbook of American Military and Diplomatic History,* ed. Antonio S. Thompson and Christos G. Frentzos (New York: Routledge, 2013).

in droves for "ends which I believe to be evil and unjust." Refusing to return to the front, Sassoon expected to be court-martialed. He was instead examined by a medical board, which sent him to Craiglockhart War Hospital to recover from what was deemed exhaustion.[12]

Guilty about living in relative comfort while his men continued to suffer, Sassoon returned to the front in 1918. He was wounded again, ending his service permanently. His insistent desire to reexamine his war experiences fueled the obsessive postwar literary career that defined the rest of his life. Between 1928 and 1945, Sassoon published a total of six memoirs that dealt, to varying degrees, with the influences of WWI. The first three were fictionalized, though the narrator, George Sherston, was an only slightly-altered literary stand-in for Sassoon. Most of the events recounted in *The Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, *The Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, and *Sherston's Progress* were lifted out of Sassoon's own life and personal writings. The later three memoirs—*The Old Century and Seven More Years, The Weald of Youth*, and *Siegfried's Journey*—covered mostly the same stretch of time as the first three, but were nonfiction and narrated by Sassoon. Through both his poetry and his prose, Sassoon assumed a prime place in the British postwar literary landscape, and was publicly recognized as a leading voice in the soldier-prompted dialogue seeking to reveal the war's true nature.[13]

O'Brien's entry into his own war was notably different from Sassoon's. Having graduated from Macalester College in spring, 1968, O'Brien was no longer eligible for academic deferment. Shortly after receiving his diploma, he also received his draft notice. Entirely opposed to the war, O'Brien was convinced its stated aims were both questionable and morally unjust. He spent the summer of 1968, and the months of basic training at Fort Lewis after that, debating whether or not to flee to Canada. He wrestled with the fact that he loved his country, but disagreed with its actions in Vietnam. He felt a sense of duty to serve, but also a sense of duty to object. In the end, he found the two sides irreconcilable. His choice to go to Vietnam was made, according to O'Brien, out of cowardice and fear of embarrassment. As much as he believed that killing for uncertain reasons was corrupt, he could not find the courage required to say no. Shipping off to Vietnam "wasn't a decision," O'Brien later said, "it was a forfeiture of a decision."[14]

From 1969 to 1970, O'Brien served as an infantry soldier in Alpha Company's Third Platoon, Fifth Battalion of the 23rd Americal Division. He ended his tour with a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. O'Brien admits that much of his combat experience was characterized by simply trying to survive, and wondering how he was succeeding. He wrote occasionally during his downtime, and some of those early pieces made their way into his first published works. Like Sassoon, O'Brien found that his war experiences became a fundamental part of his postwar character, intimately connected to both his memory and his writing. Despite the variety of his literary subjects, his writing invariably returns to the Vietnam War. His novel *Going After Cacciato,* which won the 1979 National Book Award, is a rumination on just how far a soldier's imagination can stretch under the duress of combat. His most famous book, *The Things They Carried*, is narrated by a Vietnam-soldier-turned-author named Tim O'Brien, who

12 For the full text of "A Soldier's Declaration," see: Siegfried Sassoon's Protest Album, Private Papers, Imperial War Museum; The medical board was arranged by Robert Graves, who also despised the war but worried Sassoon's willingness to be court-martialed was an impulsive decision and hoped to save him from it. Graves and Sassoon both served in the Royal Welch Fusiliers, and became close friends as a result of shared war experiences and literary passions. Graves was also a war poet, and authored the famous WWI memoir *Goodbye to All That*. In Sassoon's fictionalized memoirs, Graves appears as the character David Cromlech.

13 *"…Sassoon returned to the front in 1918."*: Sassoon was not technically supposed to return to the front. He had to convince his psychiatrist to sign the papers allowing him to return to service; *"…Sassoon's own life and personal writings."*: At times Sassoon directly copied writing from his own diary entries into his fictional memoirs, or quoted himself; For biographical information about Sassoon see: Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Poet, A Biography (1886-1918),* (London: Duckworth & Co. Ltd., 1998); Max Egremont, *Siegfried Sassoon: A Biography,* (London: Picador, 2005); Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory; Paul Fussell's Introduction to Siegfried Sassoon*, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man,* (New York: Penguin, 2013); "Mutiny" in Winter and Baggett, 1914-1918. Sassoon collected reviews of his poetry in a scrapbook. See: Scrapbook: 1916-1918, Box 1, Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

14 Ward and Burns, *Vietnam: An Intimate History*, 318.

explores what it means to remember war through stories.[15] O'Brien has also written extensively about Vietnam in essays, short fiction, lectures, and speeches. He maintains to this day an immense sense of shame over serving in Vietnam, and continues to question what it means to have killed in service of a cause in which he did not believe.[16]

For both Sassoon and O'Brien, personal memory was what granted them the ability to recreate or invoke war experiences—their own war history. Written recollections of their wars were guided by what they remembered, and how they remembered it. Their writing thus contributed to the literary history of war, but did so, as O'Brien once described it, from "the contested frontier between actuality and story." By injecting the complicated and slippery substance of memory into the body of the past, both authors created versions of their historical wars that resided "outside history, complementing history, reimagining or manufacturing history, even when the stories… have been inspired and midwifed by actual historical events." Sassoon and O'Brien were obsessed with this unavoidable interplay. Over the course of their literary careers, they focused as much, if not more, on the memory of war as on war itself. They recognized that memory gave them back their past, but not always in the way it had occurred. Memory could make the past inescapable, or erase it completely. For two writers intent on revisiting their own wars by floating between fiction and nonfiction, personal memory was both a blessing and a curse.[17]

Sassoon and O'Brien were not alone in their unshakeable obsession with memory, evidenced in part by the prevalence of memory as a subject in the collective work of their soldier-author peers. Historical and academic analyses of war literature vary in their chosen focal points, but invariably acknowledge, to some degree, the critical influence of memory. Among those studies devoted specifically to the relationship between memory and war literature, Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* stands as a core work linking war history to the narrative memories of soldier-authors in particular. Though Fussell focused on WWI, the themes and methods he discussed translate across wars, largely because soldier-authored literature can convey how one soldier's experience in his particular war mirrors that of an average soldier in any war. For any combat soldier, postwar life is defined by the act of remembering his own past, his personal memory oscillating between friend and foe. Blunden opens his famous war memoir by articulating the universal relationship between the combat soldier and memory: "I know that memory has her little ways…[and] this divinity seems to me to take a perverse pleasure in playing with her votaries." In every case, the soldier attempting to recall the history of his own war finds himself face-to-face with memory, the inevitable gatekeeper of his own past. Historical events as they happened exist in the soldier's mind—and yet, they do not. When he attempts to review—or indeed, relive—his role in the war, he discovers that the imperfect and often unstable lens of memory is his only window on the past.

15 Writing about *The Things They Carried* in a paper that also covers Tim O'Brien more broadly is difficult, because the book's main character shares not only author-O'Brien's name, but also many of his experiences as a soldier and a writer. Despite O'Brien's fervent claims that *The Things They Carried* is purely fiction, it is at times hard to determine where one O'Brien ends and the other begins. For the sake of clarity, the character Tim O'Brien from *The Things They Carried* is referred to as "narrator-O'Brien." When directly comparing the two, the living Tim O'Brien is referred to as "author-O'Brien." Any use of strictly "O'Brien"refers to the author, not the character.

16 "*…the 23rd Americal Division.*": It was a company from the 23rd Americal that, a year before O'Brien's arrival in Vietnam, slaughtered over 400 Vietnamese civilians in My Lai. O'Brien spent much of his Vietnam tour grappling with that legacy, both personally and in the reactions his platoon often received from Vietnamese civilians in that area; Writing about *The Things They Carried* in a paper that also covers Tim O'Brien more broadly is difficult, because the book's main character shares not only author-O'Brien's name, but also many of his experiences as a soldier and a writer. Despite O'Brien's fervent claims that *The Things They Carried* is purely fiction, it is at times hard to determine where one O'Brien ends and the other begins. For the sake of clarity, the character Tim O'Brien from *The Things They Carried* is referred to as "narrator-O'Brien." When directly comparing the two, the living Tim O'Brien is referred to as "author-O'Brien." Any use of strictly "O'Brien" refers to the author, not the character; For biographical information about O'Brien see: Tobey C. Herzog, *Tim O'Brien*, (New York: Twayne, 1997); Ward and Burns, *Vietnam: An Intimate History,* 319. Most of the biographical information collected for this essay came from O'Brien's personal papers at the Harry Ransom Center and the personal interview with Tim O'Brien conducted by Rose Kohler, Oct. 2, 2023.

17 Tim O'Brien, *Dad's Maybe Book* (New York: Mariner Books, 2019), 191; Tim O'Brien, *Dad's Maybe Book,* 114.

Soldier-authors thus become, in many ways, just as consumed by the way war is remembered as they are by war itself.[18]

But why fixate on memory? What is at stake in the soldier-author's confrontation with his own remembrance? Memory, for one, is instructive. In allowing him to revisit actions and events in his own history, memory grants the soldier-author a means of sorting through, understanding, or even interrogating a history he struggles to comprehend. He can analyze the trajectory of his war experience with the benefit of distance and safety. Memory, though, is also terrifying, because memory can lie. Memory is almost always contradictory and uncertain, especially in cases that involve trauma. It is irregular, subjective, and vulnerable to the effects of time. The soldier's obsession with memory, therefore, is also partly rooted in the fact that it scares him. As he recalls his own past, he is beset with questions of whether his own memory aligns with historical truth.

We rely on the historian to convey the past for public understanding. Historians work to "record and remember" the past as "preservers and discoverers of the facts and stories out of which people in general imagine their civic lives."[17] In this sense, soldier-authors act as historians of their own wars. Soldier-authored literature, even when fictionalized, sets forth a record of war that illuminates part of its reality. Such an exploration of memory is certainly a form of personal reflection, but can also seek to inform or argue. These works thus contribute to the broader collective historical understanding of the war they describe, or of war more generally. But for the soldier-author, personal memory is inescapable. By writing about war as it exists in his own memory, he moves from the realm of abstract history to the intensely individual experience. This is certainly history, but history of a different kind. Personal memory can be flawed. It can create fictions, the products of imagination based on terrible events. History records what happened, but personal memory records how it felt. Memory is made up of the parts of history which stick. In the end, a combat soldier's personal memory of war is not the war exactly as it happened, but the war as it lives on. It is based in, but diverges from, pure historical truth.[19]

Thus, soldier-authors write at the unique juncture of history and memory, relating the experience of war as it resides and evolves in their personal memory. The result is a genre of war literature that reveals interactions between the historical truth of war, personal combat memory, and the national public memory of conflict. These interactions are embodied in the literature's recurring central themes. War produces an unbridgeable gap in experience between those who endure combat, and those who do not. War's distinct language widens this gap, and demands that war memory undergo acts of translation. These translations address the contradictory nature of war's truths, and the combined challenges of truth and memory at times prompt fictional, yet authentic, accounts of war. As soldier-authors explore these themes in their work, they advance a fascinating comprehension of war acquired not strictly from the pages of history or the synapses of memory, but rather from the explosive point of collision between the two.

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18 "*…playing with her votaries.*": Edmund Blunden, Undertones of War, (London: Penguin, 2010), xli. Undertones of War, like Graves's *Goodbye to All That* and Sassoon's *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, became one of the seminal personal reflections to emerge from WWI. Blunden, though, was first and foremost a poet. *Undertones of War* was published with a collection of war poetry at the back. It was stylistically poetic in a way Sassoon and Graves were not, despite being poets themselves. Though he wrote much poetry after the war, only about 20 of Blunden's poems written during his time at the front made it to the Armistice. Like many other things of beauty, the majority of his wartime poetry was destroyed in the trenches.

19 "*…imagine their civic lives.*": David W. Blight, "Introduction: The Confluence of History and Memory," in *Beyond the Battlefield: Race, Memory, and the American Civil War* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), 1.

THE UNBRIDGEABLE GAP OF WAR

> *I, a single human being with my little stock of earthly experience in my head, was entering once again the veritable gloom and disaster of the thing called Armageddon.*
> *-SIEGFRIED SASSOON,* Memoirs of an Infantry Officer

WAR IS DISTINCT IN ITS DISRUPTION of the fundamental human capacity for mutual understanding. Lacking any comparable event in civilian life, the nature of war produces a stark division between the lived experience of soldiers and civilians. The only way to fully grasp what it is like to slog through the cold trench mud or to hump through the humid jungle is to have done it. This unbridgeable gap in experience and understanding separating soldiers and civilians is often rendered by the soldier-author as a postwar sense of intense alienation and isolation. Conversations with civilian friends and relatives become stilted and hollow. Everyday tasks like shopping or picking up mail feel trivial and unfamiliar. Trauma transforms thunderstorms or busy street corners into unpredictable battlegrounds with images from the past. Soldiers are buffeted with reminders that they are a people set apart in both personal history, and personal memory.

With Sherston's remark in *Infantry Officer* that "we were carrying something in our heads which belonged to us alone," Sassoon articulated the soldier's sentiment that war experience made one's home a foreign land. He wrote extensively about the soldier-civilian divide, eventually recognizing that the former soldier's alienation resulted as much from civilian incomprehension as from the singular personal evolution war engendered. Embedded in Sherston's oscillation between the front-line trenches and his English country home is Sassoon's assertion that combat experience made the prewar and postwar selves irreconcilable. While on leave, Sherston finds that the excitement of escaping the battlefield is quickly replaced by the discomfort of feeling out of place and misunderstood. The peaceful life of the non-soldier seems anomalous to someone with memories of artillery barrages and night raids. Sherston's insistence that "the man who had really endured the War at its worst was everlastingly differentiated from everyone except his fellow soldiers" reflected Sassoon's conclusion that by fundamentally and irreversibly altering its participants, war left the soldier's postwar self incompatible with civilian life.[20]

O'Brien also expressed the Vietnam soldier's postwar alienation, often building the frustration, hopelessness, and isolation spawned by war's unbridgeable gap into his narrative framework. *The Things They Carried* operates similarly to *Infantry Officer* in repeatedly transitioning between America and Vietnam. Some stories take place in the jungle, others in backyards or suburban roads of home before and after the war. O'Brien's soldier characters feel out of sync with the civilian world they come from, not only because America changed, but even more so because they did. Sherston's claim of everlasting differentiation, a now-permanent otherness, could have easily made him a Vietnam soldier. Phil Caputo's famous memoir *A Rumor of War*, for instance, describes the Vietnam soldier's nostalgia for war as "a recognition of how deeply we had been changed, how different we were from everyone who had not shared with us the miseries of the monsoon, the exhausting patrols, the fear of a combat assault on a hot landing zone…The civilian world seemed alien. We did not belong to it as much as we did to that other world, where we had fought and our friends had died."[21]

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20 Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, (Londoner: Faber and Faber, 1965), 161; Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 194-195. Sassoon's focus on the prewar vs. postwar self is not restricted to *Infantry Officer*, but in fact guides the fictional memoir series as a whole. The first book, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, covers Sherston's youth in the English country and the outbreak of war. *Infantry Officer* covers Sherston's war years roughly through 1917, and *Sherston's Progress* covers the end of the war and some time after. The result is an overarching exploration of the differences between the prewar and postwar Sherston as they relate to his war experiences.

21 *"…more so because they did."*: Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried,* (New York: Mariner Books, 2009). Feelings of alienation and isolation often produced a resentful contempt among soldiers for the civilian population, which also gets reflected in soldier-authored literature. Sassoon described it as "indefinite hostility to 'people at home who couldn't understand.'" (Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer,* 134). He explored the idea further in his poetry and nonfiction prose. O'Brien, too, expressed the soldier's hostility in both his fiction

Notably, British soldiers could make the journey from the Western Front to England in less than a day, and often returned home on leave. From the central United States to Vietnam was a journey of over 8,000 miles, and American soldiers typically spent the full year or more of their tour "in country." Thus, WWI for the British was, as Fussell described it, a case of "ironic close exile," whereas Vietnam for Americans was decisively far. Soldier-authored literature from both wars, however, reaches identical conclusions about the former soldier's isolation. Postwar alienation proves universal to combat experience. War's unbridgeable gap defines a soldier's approach to war memory, regardless of where or how his war is fought.[22]

Trench warfare was a cold, wet, muddy affair, ripe with the smell of decomposing bodies and rotting wooden duckboards. The hot, humid, sweaty landscape of Vietnam also carried the smell of festering mud and corpses. Mustard gas turned into Napalm. Artillery threats were identifiable by sound—dull, repetitive thuds rolling ominously from a distance, or screeching whistles as shells flew overhead. Mines and mortars cracked while machine guns clattered. Flares and air strikes created blinding flashes, and the metallic tang of explosive residue mixed with the coppery taste of blood. War, in short, was an overwhelming barrage of sensory stimuli.

As central as these sensory details are to the soldier's memory of combat, he struggles to recreate them. Sassoon concedes that memory itself often dulls sensory experience in the mind, but even a perfect memory would fail to write perfectly the physical experience of war. Through Sherston, Sassoon explains that "trench life was an existence saturated by the external senses," and "moments like those are unreproducible when I look back and try to recover their living texture" in written work. O'Brien's efforts to reveal the small, narrow, sensory perspective most soldiers develop stemmed from his desire to capture the "feel" of war, both emotionally and physically. Even so, despite his publisher's insistence that his best writing was that which conveyed the "hard physical realities" of war, O'Brien appears uncertain at times whether the true sensory feel of combat can ever fully be recreated for a non-soldier audience. Memory often fails to retain sensory detail, but it is also impossible to communicate a sensory experience to someone indirectly. In O'Brien's words, trying to describe war is "like trying to tell somebody what chocolate tastes like." As a result, war's lived sensory experience cannot be fully impressed upon civilians, further emphasizing the unbridgeable gap produced by combat.[23]

Soldier-authored literature, however vividly constructed, is incapable of completely transplanting the experience of combat to the civilian mind. But in using personal memory to relay honest truths of war, soldier-authored literature *can* force civilian readers to confront war and their relationship to it. Disillusion and waste, for instance, became themes soldier-authors emphasized to guide civilian readers to the same questions of purpose that plagued their time in combat. Though the British and American governments claimed authoritative purposes for their respective wars, average soldiers struggled to find them reflected in the stalemated carnage of the front lines. Lofty, glorified ideals died in the mud with combatants. Soldier-authors often underscored this point by describing the immense accumulation of death, and war's overwhelming appetite

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and nonfiction narratives. To "those who point at and degrade [the soldier's] bitterness, those who say it's all part of the war and that it is a job that has to be done," O'Brien once recommended a postwar vacation to Vietnam, where he was certain "there will be a mine or two still in the earth." ("Step Lightly: A Combat Infantryman Describes the Numbing Terror of the V.C. Mines at My Lai," essay by Tim O'Brien, Playboy, July, 1970, Box 22, Folder 1, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.); *"…our friends had died."*: Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*, (New York: Picador, 2017), xxiv. Caputo landed in Vietnam in 1965 as part of the first ground combat unit deployed to the country. His memoir is one of the most well-known of the Vietnam War. It is an unflinching look at not only the horror of war, but also what it means to remember it. Notably, his epigraphs are taken from, among others, the writings of Siegfried Sassoon and Wilfred Owen.

22 Fussell, T*he Great War and Modern Memory,* 65. Fussell notes that some of the front lines were so close to the English homefront that British civilians living along England's southern coast heard, and at times even saw, the artillery barrages and mine explosions taking place in northern France. (*The Great War and Modern Memory*, 68.)

23 *"…in written work."*: Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 27; Sam Lawrence to Tim O'Brien, Dec. 30, 1975, Box 4, Folder 4, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; *"…what chocolate tastes like."*: O'Brien, *The Things They Carried,* 108.

for youth and innocence. Sassoon's witnessing of the "failure of war-aims and war-ideals" led to his argument that the average soldier was "betrayed by the cause for which he suffered." This fueled both his 1917 protest and his war writing, which readers noted made "no armistice with conventional patriotism," and eliminated "all glaring heroics or cheap patriotic sentiment" in a way which created "a character of truth and sincerity." O'Brien, too, tried to convey his perpetual inner turmoil over what he had viewed since 1968 as the proposed "efficacy and moral righteousness of killing people for uncertain reasons." Like Sassoon, O'Brien dispensed with the patriotic fanfare, preferring to write gritty, honest, at times gruesome scenes that conveyed the waste and corruption he had found in war. It was this insistence about the revelatory power of war's ugly truths that became the bedrock of his postwar writing, and stayed with him long after Vietnam. Writing to fellow Vietnam soldier-author Larry Heinemann in 2006, O'Brien shared that even when the process of recalling the war felt exhausting or futile, there remained a compelling reason to continue which stemmed beyond their own war. "Perhaps some 15 year-old kid warrior-to-be will tune in for the scary ride of it," he imagined, "and yours might be the voice that makes that kid go, Yikes, this war shit stinks." In these ways, Sassoon and O'Brien, like many soldier-authors, often turned personal combat memory into the material of sociopolitical argument.[24]

This was, in many instances, the express goal of the writing. Sassoon admitted that his literary purpose was partly to force the British public to acknowledge the horror of WWI. The comfortable ignorance he saw in the British population angered him, and he condemned instances of blind faith in the government's official war narrative. "Evidences of civilian callousness and complacency were plentiful," he wrote, and "comfort-loving people are obliged to avoid self-knowledge – especially when there is a war on." O'Brien similarly contends that soldier memory functions as a "corrective"—both to official, government-sponsored narratives of war rooted in lofty rhetorical ideals, and to the national, collective public memory of a conflict which sanitizes or obfuscates its true nature. Personal memory takes war out of the abstract, illustrating the danger of sacrificing the certainty of death and destruction for very uncertain purposes. "The absence of personal witnessing," O'Brien argues, "can leave an impression of virtue where there is none."[25]

Sassoon's version of "corrective" was "indictment." By the end of WWI, Sassoon distrusted two

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24 *"...appetite for youth and innocence."*: Death statistics in both wars are staggering. By the end of WWI, 50% of soldiers from all sides were listed as either casualties or prisoners of war. Over 880,000 British soldiers were killed, the equivalent of about 12.5% of British men in uniform, and roughly 6% of the adult male population in Britain at the time. Vietnam cost the U.S. over 58,000 lives, which amounted to roughly 2% of those who served. The real shock, however, was in the age breakdowns. 74% of British deaths were men under 30, but those under 20 were most likely to be killed. Of those serving between the ages of 15-24, roughly 15% were dead by 1918. The average age of soldiers killed in Vietnam was roughly 22, though the majority of the war dead were aged 19-21. This age bracket accounted for about 55% of the total deaths. Thus, for soldiers in both wars, it was extremely evident that the conflict was eating its way through the bright, future generations for very little positive purpose. On WWI casualty statistics, see: Winter and Baggett, *1914-1918;* "The Fallen," *UK Parliament*; Jay M. Winter, "Britain's 'Lost Generation' of the First World War," *Population Studies* 31, no. 3, November 1977, 449-466. Vietnam age calculations are my own estimations, which came from basic analysis of: Vietnam Conflict Extract Data File; *"...cause for which he suffered"*: Personal notes from April 12, n.d., Box 1, Folder "Sassoon, Siegfried Notes [c.1919]," Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; First quote taken from "A Soldier Poet," review by E. B. O. in the *Morning Post*, May 11, 1917, Box 1, Scrapbook: 1916-1918, Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Second quote taken from review of *The Old Huntsman* in *Cambridge Magazine*, June 2, 1917, Box 1, Scrapbook: 1916-1918, Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Sassoon's "Declaration" expressed his belief that the war, "upon which I entered as a war of defence and liberation, has now become a war of aggression and conquest. I believe that the purposes for which I and my fellow-soldiers entered upon this war should have been so clearly stated as to have made it impossible to change them, and that, had this been done, the objects which actuated us would now be attainable by negotiation"; *"...killing people for uncertain reasons."*: Tim O'Brien, personal interview conducted by Rose Kohler, Oct. 2, 2023; *"...this war shit stinks."*: Tim O'Brien to Larry Heinemann, Aug. 16, 2006, Box 23, Folder 9, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

25 *"...especially when there is a war on."*: Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 195; All of these thoughts were expressed to me in my interview with O'Brien, but they also appear consistently in his writings and papers. O'Brien says that phrases like "self-determination" and "containment" were used as justification for actions in Vietnam, even if it was not always clear what the U.S. government actually meant by them. In our interview, he condemned the use of the idea of "containing the spread of communism as if that were just a given for killing people." Both through speaking with him and reviewing his papers, it became clear that one of O'Brien's biggest critiques of the Vietnam War was the American willingness to kill and die—to create irreversible damage at home and abroad—for what he considers entirely uncertain ends.

things: "generals and generalizations." He feared that unless the personal testimonies of those who served in the Great War were injected into the historical narrative, the British public would continue to frame the conflict as a patriotic effort in defense of glorified idealism. He expressed a need for "exactitude and detail in examining an institution like war," and advocated for any attempts, particularly literary ones, to force the British populace to confront the full horror of the slaughter. His contemporaries agreed with him. Post-WWI soldier-authored literature became characterized by its deeply personal nature, intensely detailed descriptions, and its refusal to shy away from war's realities. Sassoon's writing was widely considered a triumphant realist success, capable of jolting the British citizenry with its stark reminders that war was not the romantic endeavor most envisioned. Reviewing *The Old Huntsman* in 1917, Virginia Woolf wrote that "as [Sassoon's] jaunty matter-of-fact statements succeed each other such self-loathing, such hatred accumulates behind them that we say to ourselves 'Yes, this is going on; and we are sitting here watching it,' with a new shock of surprise, with an uneasy desire to leave our place in the audience."[26]

O'Brien's works received similar reviews, both from critics applauding his unflinching willingness to expose the true thoughts and feelings of the suffering combat soldier, and from civilian readers discovering in his works an uncomfortable incentive to rethink their own beliefs about the Vietnam War. Veterans often wrote O'Brien to express appreciation for finding their own memories reflected, finally, by someone at home, but civilian readers wrote equally often to convey how their perspective changed having read his books. Larry Johnson told O'Brien in 1980 that:

> *I remember how wiped out I was the first time I read your* If I Die in a Combat Zone. *That wasn't guilt. It was grief. Why was I grieving? Why?...Because in missing that war I've missed my place in time, or missed my manhood? Or because I didn't choose to miss my manhood, but only to protest something I never did and still don't understand? See how pathetic that is? I watch you…wrestle with problems of courage and violence and love of war, while I'm only interested in my own rites of passage, my own self-worth, myself. Like staring into a pool of soldier's blood in order to straighten my tie. Now that's obscene.*

In this way, written war memory makes a civilian audience think critically and respond viscerally to depictions of war's reality. This explains why soldier-authors, faced with the unbridgeable gap produced by their own historical experience, continue to write their war stories for public audiences.[27]

The unbridgeable gap of war prevents soldier-authors from ever generating a complete understanding of war in the civilian mind. In other words, their literature will never close the gap. It does, however, force civilians to reflect more deeply on the war's details. Personal combat memory can pull the national public memory of war out of its comfortable, insulated abstraction, shifting the civilian dialogue about war despite failing to induct civilians into war experience directly. In June, 1968, a month after O'Brien was drafted, he received a letter from Jim Vance, his publisher at the Worthington Daily Globe. Regarding global politics, Vance contended that the Soviet Union could not be trusted to honor any diplomatic agreements as long as communism survived elsewhere in the world. For this reason, he argued, "we must stick by our guns in Vietnam and elsewhere…We need now to persevere and, hopefully, to build some stronger semblance of national purpose behind our efforts."[28]

26 *"Sassoon's version of 'corrective' was 'indictment.'"*: Sassoon uses the word "indictment" repeatedly in his postwar notes and lectures; Outline of Cosmopolitan speech and reading, Box 1, Folder "Sassoon, Siegfried Notes [c. 1919]," Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; *"…in defense of glorified idealism."*: Vietnam's "self-determination" could easily be swapped for WWI's "nationalism," and communism could be swapped for expansionism or imperialism. The ideas differ, but the rhetorical framework used in both wars remains the same; *"…full horror of the slaughter."*: Outline of Cosmopolitan speech and reading, Siegfried Sassoon Papers, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library; *"'…our place in the audience."*: "Mr. Sassoon's Poems," review by Virginia Woolf in *The Times Literary Supplement*, May 31, 1917, Box 1, Scrapbook: 1916-1918, Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

27 Larry Johnson to Tim O'Brien, Dec. 4, 1980, Box 3, Folder 2, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin..

28 Jim Vance to Tim O'Brien, June 28, 1968, Box 28, Folder 4, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, TheUniversity of Texas at Austin.

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By January, 1973, Vance felt differently. He wrote O'Brien this time that "friends are people who feel vast remorse and deep personal regret…because they were late in seeing the light on important matters," including his earlier advice to "accept a call to duty in an immoral war." He wondered how O'Brien could ever forgive him. Vance wrote again in April, this time to share a story of becoming unsettled after preparing to print a particular portrait of O'Brien from Vietnam. The photo—a young, smiling O'Brien standing shirtless in front of a mangled tree—reminded Vance of Sgt. John Ulfers, a 22-year-old Iowan killed in Tây Ninh in November, 1968, nine days before the end of his tour. Six months before he died, the *Worthington Daily Globe* had published Ulfers's personal diary alongside his photo—also young, shirtless, and standing in front of some mangled trees. Vance snapped. "I looked at that photo of you," he explained, and:

> *…all I could see was Ulfers. It was like getting hit by a chunk of déjà vu-shrapnel…I spent the rest of the day and night nursing all the powerful, bloody hurts this war has caused so many. And feeling frustration over the seemingly sightless ignorance of much of the nation about the wrongness of what America did and continues to do. I spent Sunday re-reading your book, and I was only a few pages into it when I realized the obvious, what I knew before – this country has to know what it did. This country has to hurt plenty over what it did in Vietnam…Jim Vance has to know what he did. Ulfers' blood is all over me. And over the flag we pledge god and country to.*

It was writing like O'Brien's, Vance insisted, that could achieve this. By pitting the lived realities of combat against a national public memory of war forged, in part, by the distance between the public and the war itself, soldier-authored literature could hold a nation accountable for its own deeds. Many readers found that being forced to confront the horror made them think differently about the entire enterprise. Vance ended his letter with the declaration that "IF I DIE has to sell for a lot more reasons than [to] make a name for a deserving, sensitive author."[27]

28 Jim Vance to Tim O'Brien, June 28, 1968, Box 28, Folder 4, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

29 Vance's remorse is found in: Jim Vance to Tim O'Brien, Jan. 12, 1973, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Comments about Ulfers are found in: Jim Vance to Tim O'Brien, April 2, 1973, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

TRANSLATING THE LANGUAGE OF WAR

> *The easy aphorisms hold no hope for the middle man, the man…going through the act of death and coming through embarrassingly alive.*
> -*TIM O'BRIEN,* If I Die in a Combat Zone

DURING HIS TIME AT THE FRONT, a soldier learns the language of war, one starkly different from the language of peace. He becomes multilingual, but his personal memory, forged in combat, is recorded in the language of war. This partly accounts for the unbridgeable gap between soldiers and civilians—war's language is intelligible only to those with combat experience. For soldier-authors, then, writing their personal memory of war becomes an act of translation. Though not a direct copy of the memory itself, personal memory translated from the language of war recodes the soldier-author's historical experience for the uninitiated civilian audience.

In O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, Norman Bowker's character is defined by his inability to talk about Vietnam, despite his desperate desire—even need—to share his past. Bowker imagines recounting his combat memories, inventing entire conversations in which he can vocalize his innermost thoughts. But these conversations never happen. Instead, Bowker silently drives in circles around his hometown lake, failing to articulate his own memories. He believes that nobody wants to hear the truthful kinds of horror stories combat soldiers have to tell. More critically, though, Bowker simply lacks the ability to translate them. Later, narrator-O'Brien shares a letter in which Bowker suggests that narrator-O'Brien should write a story about a struggling Vietnam veteran who feels as though he died in the war. Bowker explains that "this guy wants to talk about it, but he *can't*…I'd write it myself except I can't ever find the words…I can't figure out what exactly to *say*." The letter shocks narrator-O'Brien, who turned to war writing naturally. He never realized that, for some, attempts to translate their own memories had proven impossible. Narrator-O'Brien explains that "the act of writing had led me through a swirl of memories that might otherwise have ended in paralysis or worse." Bowker was the proof of the potential descriptive paralysis.[30]

Author-O'Brien's exploration of translating war extends far beyond the character Norman Bowker. As early as 1973, O'Brien wrote in an essay for *The Boston Phoenix* that "readjustment" after returning from war was the equivalent of "forgetting a foreign language." Responses from veterans to O'Brien's works reveal that for many soldiers, personal war memory remains trapped in war language. One Vietnam veteran marveled at O'Brien's ability to translate "the language, the character of the Viet Nam experience, with its accompanying terror, horror, laughs, smiles, and absurdities." Joel Burt, an Iraq veteran, proved that the challenges posed by the need for translation are universal in war. He wrote O'Brien that he wondered, since coming home, how any soldier shares accurate stories about his war. Burt found it impossible:

> *How can you accurately tell about 24-hours-a-day, hand-shaking, gut-churning Fear? Or the murderous, cold, ever present Anger that is the by-product of it? How can you expect someone to really understand what it feels like to wonder every day if it's going to be my turn to get hit by the rocket, the mortar, the sniper? Because you know damn well it's going to be somebody!...But you tell them stories all the same in an effort to explain, and they all sound to me like a story about a story. A hollow version of what REALLY happened. And you can tell in their eyes and the way they say 'uh huh' that they just don't get it…You don't get mad in the least. It's not their fault. You know it's just because they weren't there.*[31]

30 O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 151-152.

31 "*…forgetting a foreign language.*": "Surviving in Vietnam and the USA; No Problems: That's My Problem," essay by Tim O'Brien in *The Boston Phoenix,* Jan. 23, 1973, Box 22, Folder 1, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; "*…smiles, and absurdities.*": From Jerry (no last name) to Tim O'Brien, Oct. 2, 1979, Box 3, Folder 2, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. "Vietnam" and "Viet Nam" are both correct spellings. "Vietnam" is now the more common usage; Joel Burt to Tim O'Brien, Nov. 2009, Box 45, Folder 7, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. As further evidence for the claim that war has its own language, Burt writes about having read *The Things They Carried* while in the Air Force Academy. It was only after he had been deployed that he realized he had not fully understood the book. Iraq, he

O'Brien is not the only soldier-author to engage with the challenge of war's language. Blunden, for instance, opened the first edition of his memoir with his fear that the book would prove meaningless because nobody would be able to understand it besides combat soldiers who had already endured the trenches. This was, according to Blunden, partly a result of the civilian lack of first-hand experience, but also a byproduct of the inability to fully convey his thoughts using the book's available language. Sassoon grappled in his writing with a similar frustration, often noting places where he felt that language—namely, the secondary language of the public-facing text—failed to capture his memories in a way that truly replicated how they were lived. Sherston worries that his reader likely finds "nothing" in his recorded details from the front, despite their overwhelming significance to him at the time. He perceives a futility in language, wondering "what use… were printed words against a war like this?"[32]

Given the difficulty of the translation process, details that recur in translated soldier-authored texts often signal fundamental characteristics of war. "Ghosts" and "haunting" are notable examples. These words and their accompanying metaphors, appearing in nearly every major piece of soldier-authored literature from both wars, illustrate that death shapes both the soldier's experience and memory of combat. Some authors portray the former soldier, recalling his war experiences of the past, as a ghost haunting his own memories. By thinking back on his time in the war, he floats across the landscape of his own personal history, revisiting (though not completely reinhabiting) his former self. Other authors focus on the way the war dead haunt the living, ghostly presences permeating the former soldier's postwar life. These war ghosts not only force the former soldier to remember his own past, but often influence how he does so. In both cases, death becomes a normalized constant. Dead friends of the past haunt the memories of the living, and the living haunt their own death-filled pasts. At the same time, however, the dead remain dead, and the living remember.

The haunting presence of a soldier-author's ghost suggests that even though the soldier-author survived, he feels the war killed him in some way. It also implies that he remains tethered to the war, his memory pulling his postwar-self back through his own history. Blunden called war a "ghost story," reflecting that "my experiences in [WWI] have haunted me all my life, and for many days I have, it seemed, lived in that world rather than this." Sassoon described Sherston (and by implication, himself) as a specter in his own history, writing that "if ghosts can traverse time and choose their ground, I would return to the Bois Français sector as it was then." Sassoon's poetry, in particular, is filled with references to ghosts of the war-dead. O'Brien focuses more intently on the ghosts of the dead haunting the living, and presents war stories as a means of keeping the dead alive. Even so, the ending to *The Things They Carried* suggests that O'Brien places his prewar self among the dead to be saved. The book's final line reads "it is Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story." Larry Heinemann's *Paco's Story* is narrated by a ghost, who admits that he and his fellow war-ghosts control living memory. Interestingly, *Paco's Story* also reads like an untranslated work. Heinemann's argument about the gruesome destruction of Vietnam is clear, but much of the phraseology, jargon, and vulgarity is unintelligible to a civilian reader. In its deliberate maintenance of original war language, the novel seems to belong to soldiers rather than civilians.[33]

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claimed, had made him understand. He found himself recalling stories from the book at random points during his tour: "then you remember Tim O'Brien from way back in college talking about 'true war stories' and you laugh a nasty laugh because oh my God – YOU GET IT NOW!! And you hate that you get it – you wish you were still that sir Galahad you used to be still wondering what he meant… You know EXACTLY what it feels like. I know why Tim wrote about the things that woke him up in the night, because I know why I wake up in the night. It's only been a year and a half since I was there but it feels like it will never go away. And so I'm up at 4 in the morning on a Sunday writing an email to someone I don't even know."

32 "…*the book's available language.*": Blunden described war as an education, an idea Fussell also finds in Sassoon's work. Fussell refers to it as "knowledge born of the line." (*The Great War and Modern Memory,* 92) Thus, learning the language of war is a given for all soldiers. Learning to translate, however, is not. This is why Norman Bowker can write the story he is compelled to tell in a letter to O'Brien, but cannot seem to express it elsewhere. His inability to translate restricts him from sharing his war memories with a civilian audience, but the mutual intelligibility of war's language amongst soldiers allows him to write to O'Brien without having to translate; Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 132, 144, 170.

33 "…*the war killed him in some way.*": This supports Norman Bowker's vision of a soldier who, despite making it through Vietnam,

War's language is mutually intelligible among soldiers, enabling combat veterans to draw certain elements out of soldier-authored texts which civilian readers cannot register. This helps illuminate the fraternal relationship combat soldiers have to one another, and explains why they can see themselves reflected in literature written by fellow soldiers. As one of O'Brien's former Alpha Company buddies once wrote to him, "when I can't remember, I just buy one of your books." The combination of shared experience and shared language invokes a soldier-reader's memories of his own war. In this way, soldier-authored literature is as much an outgrowth of personal war memory as it is an invitation into it. O'Brien's works sparked mountains of letters from former soldiers highlighting the significance of reading details only they could appreciate. One former Marine, Bill Donoghue, wrote O'Brien in 1979 that "there are words and phrases in *Cacciato* that could only be understood or savored fully by someone who had been a grunt in Viet Nam." Donoghue noted that reading *Cacciato* "enabled me to mark passages that I could show to my wife and say, 'This is what it was like.'" He also admitted, though, that Cacciato spurred a deeper, internal revisiting of his time in Vietnam. He claimed that reading O'Brien's novel "conjured up actual, vivid memories for me…Your sentences reflecting the absurdity, insanity, futility, and chaos of the War are crystal clear. I am not ashamed to admit having wept several times… I re-lived more experiences as a corpsman than I care to describe." Donoghue's letter emphasized that translated combat memory promoted further memory, but also rendered combat experience in a form digestible for non-soldiers. A translation could never replicate combat directly, but it could generate an awareness which narrowed, in some way, the unbridgeable gap.[34]

Sue O'Neill had a particularly strong response to *The Things They Carried*. Her letter was unique—as an army nurse, she was one of the comparatively small number of women who actively served in Vietnam. She was also an extremely rare voice among the overwhelmingly male veteran responses to O'Brien's writing. O'Neill shared that *The Things They Carried* had made her rethink her own war. "I suppose I should thank you," she offered, "but maybe I should just tell you to go to hell." She explained that since coming home, she had done a pretty good job of burying her Vietnam memories, a tendency she attributed to the fact that she could not truly remember what happened from 1969 to 1970, and even if she could, most people preferred she did not. O'Neill, though, admitted with self-aware sarcasm that her own history did have a way of creeping up on her:

> *I don't live in the past, unless somebody calls me up as the token female veteran to give a Vet's Day address or something (funny – once I do that, the folks who asked me never ask again)…Or unless it's to hold an anti-war banner when we're bombing third-world countries. Or unless my kids ask me why they can't play with guns in my presence. Or unless I suddenly decide I can't eat meat anymore because I can't stomach the thought of somebody killing it. I mean, I'm so well-adjusted, why would I ever want to dig up the old skeletons?*

In the end, O'Neill offered, she had "read this damned, excellent, memory-sparking BOOK that's collected bits of flotsam and jetsam about combat – and [found] myself, one fine day, sticking my own pieces of flotsam and jetsam into a computer file entitled 'VN.'" Reading O'Brien's book not only forced O'Neill to contend with her own personal memory of combat, but also showed her the value of taking on the difficult task of translating it. "Thanks so much," she signed off. "Go to hell."[35]

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feels he died in the jungle; *"…that world rather than this."*: Blunden, *Undertones of War*, 36; *"…as it was then."*: Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 27. Sherston, describing the stream of men returning from the Somme offensive, wonders if he had in fact "watched an army of ghosts" (Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer,* 76); *"…Timmy's life with a story."*: O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 233; Larry Heinemann, *Paco's Story (*New York: Vintage Books, 2005).

34 *"…I just buy one of your books."*: Buddy Wolf to Tim O'Brien, Sept. 2007, Box 51, Folder 2, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; Bill Donoghue to Tim O'Brien, May 25, 1979, Box 3, Folder 2, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

35 Of the estimated 2.5+ million Americans who served in Vietnam, only about 10,000 of them were women, most of them nurses. See Katie Lang, "Commemorating the 30th Anniversary of the Vietnam Women's Memorial," *DOD News, U.S. Department of Defense,* Nov. 7, 2023. Sue O'Neill to Tim O'Brien, March 15, 1996, Box 17, Folder 5, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

WAR'S TRUTHS & CONTRADICTIONS

Infallible oracles are invariably humbugs.
-SIEGFRIED SASSOON, Personal Notes

IN HIS FINAL NONFICTION MEMOIR, Sassoon recalled his decision to turn his poetic attentions to the war. The shock and disillusion of the war's early years spawned Sassoon's "ferocious and defiant resolve to tell the truth about the War in every way possible." This resolve was clear to his readers. One reviewer's remark that "the whole purpose of his war poems is apparently the stripping of the tinsel from the robes of Bellona, the revelation of the stark and clattering skeleton beneath," echoed the wider reaction of the British public to Sassoon's war writing. O'Brien developed a similarly ferocious and defiant resolve. He found that the personal significance of his war experience and the American public's detachment compelled him to write the ugly and often-ignored truths of Vietnam. O'Brien later explained that he "wanted not only to describe the physical things…but also to capture the peculiar atmosphere and environment and feeling" of combat for the average soldier. It was important, he felt, to "tell truly of the horror of that war, which was partly the horror of any war, but which was made worse, both physically and emotionally, by the absence of any personal convictions regarding its justice."[36]

O'Brien's readers and reviewers, too, commended his ability to convey "real" war, and admired his willingness to place his audience in the uncomfortable position of staring directly at war's true features. Many also appreciated the way O'Brien's works prompted difficult but critical questions about Vietnam, and about war more generally. For this reason, O'Brien's works have become seminal lessons for the public about the realities of war—particularly *The Things They Carried,* which was described as both "prose headed for the nerve center of what was Vietnam" and "high up on the list of best fiction about any war." publication it has taken its spot on school reading lists across the country, and many educators spanning both grade schools and university courses have stories about the impact its stark brutality and unfiltered language continues to have on the way young students understand national narratives of war. Notably, *The Things They Carried* has also been banned in many schools across the country.[37]

Despite the verisimilitude in both Sassoon's and O'Brien's works, there remains an enduring presence of contradiction within a soldier's war memory. This suggests that one of the truths of war is that there are no definitive truths. A single soldier can live multiple wars within one conflict, all of which are distinct from the war lived by the man next to him. Soldier-authors often note war's variability, and both WWI and Vietnam appeared like many different wars wrapped up into one. Differences in rank, branch, location, and age produced strikingly different combat experiences. Service by voluntary enlistment versus conscription also changed mental and emotional approaches to war. Duration was the greatest source of variability. Soldiers like Sassoon, Blunden, and Graves, whose service spanned multiple years, revealed in their memoirs that the war evolved like a living creature. Blunden recalled that by 1918, most soldiers could barely comprehend tactics from the

36 "*…in every way possible.*": Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey*, 40; "*…to Sassoon's war writing.*": "Rupert Brooke and the Influence of War on Poetry" by Arthur Waugh in *The Book Monthly*, n.d., Box 1, Scrapbook: 1916-1918, Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Critical reactions to Sassoon's wartime poetry were overwhelmingly positive. He received a few harsh critiques, which typically questioned his skill as a poet and insisted that the British public did not want to read such horrific and uncomfortable descriptions of the war. These only solidified Sassoon's argument about the ignorance of civilian Britain; "*…convictions regarding its justice.*": Tim O'Brien to Mrs. Eunice Hunter, Feb. 7, 1977, Box 4, Folder 5, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

37 For collected reviews of O'Brien's works, see: Series I & III, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; First quote from the *Boston Globe,* second from the *New York Times Book Review*, both reprinted in the beginning of O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*.

years prior. Abandoned trenches, skeleton buildings, and old weapons seemed like "singular relics of earlier

fighting." The war might "forget some corners of Flanders," only to "remember that corner with a vengeance" the following year. A similar trend emerged in Vietnam. The growing American troop presence combined with evolving bombing campaigns and changes to Viet Cong tactics produced progressively different combat realities between the 1960s and 1970s. O'Brien's claim that a "soldier who was in Vietnam in 1960 has a completely different set of memories than one who was there in 1969" supports his broader suggestion that "there are as many Vietnams as there were soldiers in Vietnam."[38]

Sassoon described war as "beauty, garlanded in hell," and admitted often that for all its horror, it was hard to ignore war's part-time attraction. He hated combat, but also missed it desperately when he was not at the front. O'Brien's descriptions of war often read like they've been pulled from the pages of Sassoon's memoirs. O'Brien, too, wrote that "war is hell," but acknowledged "that's not the half of it…War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead…War is grotesque. But in truth war is also beauty." This is why, in ruminating on what it means to tell a "true war story," narrator-O'Brien focuses on the relationship between truth and contradiction. "In war you lose your sense of the definite, hence your sense of truth itself," and the result is that "in a true war story nothing is ever absolutely true."[39]

Men are not the only casualties of combat—nuance is also lost. War creates and sustains "polarities" which pervade personal combat memory and define a soldier's experience at the front. Fussell refers to this as the "*versus* habit." War trains soldiers to think in contradictory divisions largely because antithesis becomes the framework around which war is constructed. Prewar and postwar versions of the self, the world, and life experience compete with one another in the soldier's mind. The home-front is divided from the fighting-front; officers are distinct from the rank-and-file. Soldiers are human but their enemy is not, turning the "us against them" mentality into a default. War's power to reverse life's natural order appears in the front's distinct division between day and night. Daylight hours made men visible, and were spent resting or working behind the front lines. It was under the cover of night's darkness that almost all of war's true action took place. The overarching contradiction, of course, is life and death. A soldier's actions in life are meant to protect him from death, and yet the enemy's death becomes the purpose of his life. In recollecting his war, a soldier often lands on its contradictory details, which fit together in his memory but nevertheless preclude a cohesive grasp of the war overall.[40]

Soldiers often come to love and hate war in equal measure. Time at the front is spent wishing for the war's end, and yet in moments of peace, the soldier often finds himself nursing battle nostalgia. Graves once wrote that Sassoon "varied between happy warrior and bitter pacifist," a characterization evident in Sassoon's own writing. His disillusion with war could not

38 *"…the following year."*: Blunden, *Undertones of War*, 178-179; *"'…soldiers in Vietnam.'"*: Tim O'Brien, personal interview conducted by Rose Kohler, Oct. 2, 2023.

39 Siegfried Sassoon, "Secret Music" in *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems* (London: William Heinemann, 1917), 54; O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 76-78.

40 On the "polarities of war" and the versus habit see: Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*; *"…mentality into a default."*: Sassoon's and O'Brien's focus on the dehumanization of the enemy is notable. Sherston discusses it directly, and O'Brien's characters reveal it through dialogue and interaction. In O'Brien's memoirs, however, he discusses it more overtly. A common Alpha Company joke, he recalls, was that breeding a Viet Cong soldier with a rat produced a midget rat (O'Brien, *Dad's Maybe Book,* 214); *"…true action took place."*: Most soldier-authored works fixate in some way on the nighttime-dominant character of combat, and express how quickly soldiers lose their usual conception of time. Raids, patrols, ambushes, and scouting missions were typically reserved for after sunset. Those writing about the trenches described nighttime artillery and machine gun fire as so heavy that, when combined with flares, the darkest hours imitated daytime. Sassoon and his fellow soldier-authors often noted how the daytime beauty of the war landscape contrasted with the utter hellscape it became at night. Sherston, at one point, is made to admit that "forgetting, for the moment, that I was at the Front to be shot at, I could almost congratulate myself on having a holiday in France without paying for it." (Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 7). O'Brien and other Vietnam authors similarly noted how the jungle waited until night to come alive. Even the simple act of sleeping in a foxhole was infinitely more terrifying in darkness than it was in the exact same sunlit location. Men who were popular within their company during the day could become pariahs at night purely because their snoring risked inviting attacks. (Described by Willie Lavender to Buddy Wolf, Nov. 2009, Box 51, Folder 2, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin).

eliminate the value he found in soldier camaraderie, and themes of friendship and loyalty amongst soldiers feature prominently in his poetry and prose. Nor could the horrors of what he witnessed ever entirely overshadow the thrilling adventure that he read into combat, which translated to Sherston's at times manic behavior in the trenches. O'Brien felt the same. He deemed his overall combat experience merely a desperate attempt to survive a war he despised, but still acknowledged the appalling thrill of certain actions. His writing also emphasized the strength of soldiers' relationships with each other in spite of their contentious relationships with the war. Much like Sassoon's, O'Brien's conflicted feelings influenced the translation of his war memories. The original title of *If I Die* was "Fire in the Hole: War Stories of a Part-Time Pacifist." After decades of wrestling with war's contradictions, he admitted in his second memoir that it is possible to "be transfixed by something you despise." This feeling is shared among veterans of all wars. Many soldier-readers acknowledged that O'Brien's most authentic war writing presented the soldier's struggle to determine what to think, and how to feel, about his own war. They echoed one soldier's declaration that war was "an experience that I wish on no other person, but that I would not trade." In his memoir, Caputo highlighted the "grip" of war's "ambivalent realities." Vietnam "had been an experience as fascinating as it was repulsive, as exhilarating as it was sad, as tender as it was cruel." He explained that "anyone who fought in Vietnam, if he is honest about himself, will have to admit he enjoyed the compelling attractiveness of combat. It was a peculiar enjoyment because it was mixed with commensurate pain."[41]

These internal conflicts are the basis for Tobey Herzog's comparison of Sassoon and O'Brien. Herzog focuses specifically on the fact that both authors chose to fight in wars with premises they fundamentally rejected, suggesting that they might undermine the validity of their own antiwar arguments. Though Herzog acknowledges that "complicated humanity" causes "inconsistencies" in soldiers that even Sassoon recognized, he takes a rather narrow, uncompelling analytical approach to both authors' works, presenting contradiction and human inconsistency as peripheral explanations rather than critically important ones. This overlooks Sassoon's and O'Brien's adamant claims that contradiction is inherent in war, and thus also key to their views (and writings) on the subject. Inconsistency is indeed a product of human nature, but it is largely the *interaction* between war's contradictory realities and human nature which produces a soldier's conflicting feelings about war. A truth of war is that those engaging in it struggle to develop a consistent response to its discordance. Thus, inconsistencies within the individual soldier's response to his own war do not undermine any one part of his feelings, but instead prove that contradiction is central to war experience. It makes sense, then, that a soldier's memories of war are also plagued by conflicting emotional responses to the events of his past.[42]

41 *"…in Sassoon's own writing."*: Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2018), 286; Reviewers noted this as well. One described his poetry as "written out of a faith that even the war could not destroy a disillusioned but abiding love of mankind." ("Sassoon – Soldier, Poet, and Man" by Louis Untermeyer, *The Evening Post*, March 15, 1919, Scrapbook: 1916-1918, Box 1, Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. Information about the original title found on the revised title page for the original manuscript, July 27, 1972, Box 4, Folder 1, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. *"'…transfixed by something you despise.'"*: O'Brien, *Dad's Maybe Book*, 361; *"'…I would not trade.'"*: Fred Guenther to Tim O'Brien, Sept. 29, 1992, Box 17, Folder 4, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; *"'…mixed with commensurate pain.'"*: Caputo, *A Rumor of War,* xxiv-xxv. Caputo's idea of the "compelling attractiveness of combat" recalls the distinction between Sassoon's eager enlistment, and O'Brien's capitulation. The most well-known soldier-authored literature from WWI and Vietnam is antiwar literature. This can occasionally give the impression that all soldiers hated the wars the entire time. As evidenced by Sassoon, this was not the case. It is also true that there were some men who wanted to go to Vietnam. A man named Judge Schonfeld, for instance, wrote O'Brien that he felt Vietnam literature was missing the story of "what it was like to be educated up the wazoo, hold no illusions about political rhetoric and still have gone – still have wanted to go." He explained that his own book sought to address this hole, "to move through elaborate intellectual shit fields to come to some nugget of why we want to go, why we do these things to each other. And then why we sing about them afterward." Regardless of the angle from which the soldier approaches his war, the presence of memory remains inescapable. (Judge Schonfeld to Tim O'Brien, Sept. 9, 1990, Box 17, Folder 3, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin).

42 Tobey C. Herzog, "Siegfried Sassoon and Tim O'Brien: Good Soldiers Fighting and Writing Unholy Wars" in *Tim O'Brien: The Things He Carries and the Stories He Tells*, 69-103, (New York: Routledge, 2018), 85. Herzog is a Vietnam veteran and scholar of Vietnam War literature. He has written extensively about O'Brien, both individually and in relation to other Vietnam authors.

Soldier-authors often used their literature to illuminate the disunity between the "true" version of war as soldiers lived it, and the version promoted by official government narratives or national public memory. Sassoon, who considered his writing "evidence" of war's reality, deliberately wrote against the existing celebratory narrative he believed was being promoted by the British government and accepted by the British citizenry in the war's earlier years. For Sassoon and his contemporaries, writing about the war served a dual purpose of interrogating their own personal memory while also breaking, and then resetting, the skewed public perception of the war. It was not always an easy task, especially during the active war years, when the British government fought hard, for reasons of national morale and political legitimacy, to control the trajectory of the war's narrative. The medical board examination assigned to Sassoon's protest was in part a calculated response by British authorities to minimize the damage an antiwar statement followed by a court-martial might cause coming from a man of Sassoon's public stature. One reviewer noted in 1917 that Sassoon's statement, "however much one might disagree with it, gave no indication that the writer was suffering from any sort of nervous shock." To the contrary, Sassoon appeared "a man of most unusual mental power and extraordinary determination of character. The fact was that the decision of the medical board was based, not upon grounds of health, but upon easily understood reasons of policy, and provided the easiest way to avoid that publicity which any other measure would have had."[43]

O'Brien, with his view of soldier-authored testimony as a "corrective," also believed that by counteracting the obfuscatory and falsely-virtuous narratives surrounding Vietnam, his writing might change how the nation perceived and memorialized war. Too often, O'Brien believes, critical human truths are absent from official war narratives. Sterile descriptions of retreat, for instance, miss the chaos and desperation of fleeing the front line spurred by the natural human disposition for fear in deadly environments. Stories based in personal memory reinject the human element of war history into the "straight" historical accounts that often eliminate it, thus offering, in O'Brien's opinion, a deeper understanding of the truth of war as it is lived.[44]

O'Brien's own war truths offer some compelling evidence. One of O'Brien's closest friends in Vietnam, Alvin "Chip" Merricks, was killed in 1969 when he stepped on a booby-trapped artillery round. The memory of a smiling Merricks being blown into a tree has haunted O'Brien deeply since Vietnam, and appears repeatedly in O'Brien's writing. First described in *If I Die*, Merricks later served as the model for the character Curt Lemon in *The Things They Carried*. Lemon's death replicates Merricks's exactly—smiling one moment, shredded by rigged artillery the next. Narrator-O'Brien is responsible for climbing into the tree to retrieve Lemon's body parts. Author-O'Brien cannot escape the memory of Merricks's death, and narrator-O'Brien cannot escape the memory of Lemon's. "I remember the white bone of an arm," narrator-O'Brien recalls, "I remember pieces of skin and something wet and yellow that must've been the intestines. The gore was horrible and stays with me. But what wakes me up twenty years later is Dave Jenson singing 'Lemon Tree' as we threw

43 Declarations of his poems as evidence appear across various speech notes in Box 1, Folder "Sassoon, Siegfried Notes [c.1919]," Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University; *"…skewed public perception of the war."*: WWI writers often looked to each other for support. Blunden, for instance, was motivated by the fact that "at a time when… any possibility of getting truth home through the barrage of war perjury was dim indeed, Sassoon and Owen conceived that by means of poetry they might start something moving." He recalled in *Undertones* the experience of reading Sassoon's Declaration while at the front, and being spurred by what he called the "splendid little war on the war." (First quote from "War Perjury" Lecture, Box 14, Folder 14, Edmund Blunden Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; Second quote from *Undertones of War,* 153); *"'…any other measure would have had.'"*: "An Officer and Nerve Shock," article in (no publication name), July, 1917, Box 1, Scrapbook: 1916-1918, Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

44 *"…perceived and memorialized war."*: Questions of memorialization are important to the former soldier, and feature in much soldier-authored literature. Heinemann's *Paco's Story* offers a good example. One character, a Vietnam veteran, describes his version of an accurate Vietnam War memorial: a wall of pristine white marble with the name of every dead soldier etched into its surface. In the middle sits a bowl filled with $100 bills and every possible form of waste (human and otherwise). The grass around the marble should be turned to mud. Anyone can crawl through the mud, reach into the bowl of waste, and keep as much money as he wants. But he must cover himself in the mud and waste and wipe it across the white marble names. The whole scene should sit at the end of the National Mall, so that Congress "can stand on the Capitol steps…and admire their work; thousands upon thousands of rows of fucked-up lives." (Heinemann, *Paco's Story*, 158); *"…truth of war as it is lived."*: Tim O'Brien, personal interview conducted by Rose Kohler, Oct. 2, 2023.

down the parts." Speaking about Merricks, O'Brien has explained that "wars do not end with the signing of a peace treaty. It's not that tidy. Wars go on and on in the memories of those who participated… And for me, too, the war is never really over – it returns at odd moments, when I'm reading a newspaper or just sitting quietly in a room with my two young sons." The grisly memory of Merricks's gruesome death permeates O'Brien's work so deeply that it reads as a central touchpoint in his personal Vietnam experience that also represents the broader reality of Vietnam. The indictment lives within the bloody human detail. If one were to check the official record, however, he would not find the details. Alvin Merricks's cause of death is listed as "unknown."[45]

THE MEMORY WAR

> *The War insisted on being remembered.*
> –*SIEGFRIED SASSOON,* Memoirs of an Infantry Officer

FOR SOLDIER-AUTHORS LIKE SASSOON and O'Brien, memory is essential to their literary arguments recalling the truth of war. The trouble with memory, however, is that it is unstable, hard to control, and subject to the profound effects of variables like trauma and time. What happened and what one remembers as having happened are often two related but not identical shades of the same history. Every soldier draws from his own combat experience the division O'Brien articulates as a split between "Vietnam-the-war and Vietnam-the-memory." The soldier's postwar life is defined, as one Vietnam veteran described, by "the absolute uncertainty of understanding what was real and what is distorted memory." Memory alters truth in some places, and renders it incomplete in others. Being faithful to one's own memory of war is difficult because memory does not always cooperate with history, and history fails entirely without memory. O'Brien simply determined that "memory speaks, yes. But it stutters. It speaks in ellipses."[46]

The former soldier's obsession with memory stems partly from his recognition that memory is what grants him access to his own history, but memory can be fundamentally and inconspicuously wrong. In his description of memory as "discoloured and lacunary,"

45 "*…as we threw down the parts.*": O'Brien, *The Things They Carried,* 79; "*…with my two young sons.*": Tim O'Brien *Speech at Hiram College*, n.d., Box 50, Folder 1, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; Death records for Alvin Merricks were consulted in the Vietnam Conflict Extract Data File, Department of Defense, Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

46 "*…Vietnam-the-war and Vietnam-the-memory.*": O'Brien, *Dad's Maybe Book,* 303; "*…what is distorted memory.*": Fred Guenther to Tim O'Brien, Sept, 29, 1992, Tim O'Brien Papers; "*…speaks in ellipses.*": O'Brien, *Dad's Maybe Book*, 186-187. O'Brien's belief that memory stutters aligns with his broader suggestion that memory is dependent on circumstance, and is therefore prone to holes. He once wrote that "part of memory, of course, has to do with the purest accident: which way did you happen to be looking when something occurred, was there a tree or a hedgerow between you and whatever happened, were you preoccupied with keeping yourself alive, etc." (Tim O'Brien to Buddy Wolf, 2007, Box 51, Folder 2, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

recollections. Sassoon's invocations of memory are often driven by frustration. He feels like his remembered war images are stripped of the extreme color, detail, and immediacy they possessed in their moment of origin. The way laughter sounded in the trenches, for instance, disappeared with time. Sassoon recognized that memory may render some historical moments improperly or imperfectly. Other moments may not be rendered at all. Strange, seemingly unimportant memories (two privates wrestling on the side of the road) persist, while critically important ones (his actions at the front that day) slip away. War stories, Sassoon admitted, may "look straightforward enough in print…but their reality remains hidden; even in the minds of old soldiers the harsh horror mellows and recedes."[47]

The challenges of memory expressed by Sassoon are echoed in O'Brien's works and in the responses he received from soldiers. One former soldier explained that "so many things from that time are faded in my own memory that I often wonder how much was real and how much I have chosen to forget." Another shared that fifteen years after returning from Vietnam, he woke up screaming. His memory took that long to reveal that the sandbags he remembered being tossed on the road outside a Saigon hospital were not sandbags at all, but corpses. O'Brien's own comrades dwelled on memory, too. In the early 2000s, O'Brien's friend Buddy Wolf created an email chain with as many surviving Alpha Company men as he could find. They used it to swap old war stories, the emails functioning like a collaborative jigsaw puzzle of memory. The strength of their memories varied, but each man was simultaneously obsessed with and terrified by the process of remembering. "It's amazing to find someone who actually remembers some of the same stuff I do," O'Brien wrote to Jerry Karr. "After all these years, you begin to wonder if you're the only person on earth carrying those memories."[48]

Buddy Wolf was deeply invested in the concept of memory. It saturated every email he sent. He signed one note to O'Brien with the question "are you sure I was in VN, Tim?" In another email, Wolf wrote that "sometimes, Tim, I think I was never there. It's like going to the Super Bowl and remembering the final score, but forgetting all the touchdowns." O'Brien's emails with Alpha Company further solidify his evident belief that personal history relies on one's ability to remember. Much like Sassoon, O'Brien contends that memory controls the soldier's ability to engage with the experiences of his past, and thus determines who he is in the present. O'Brien and Wolf's exchange continued a year later. "In a way, I guess, it's good you don't remember much," O'Brien offered, but "in another way, it's very sad that you've lost your own history." Wolf's reply conveyed just how significant the challenge of personal memory truly was for the soldier intent on interrogating his wartime past:

> *I like the way you worded this, Tim. I lost my own history. I spent a year in the Republic of South Viet Nam, and I came away with a chest full of medals, but no memories. Oh, I remember names and faces and home towns of my friends, but I have no recollection of events. Perhaps this is why I am asking so many questions. I'm sending e-mails pleading for memories. Think of me as a 'clearing house' for old memories. I'm simply trying to remember. 43 men from Alpha Company died, and I can only recall watching one of them in their final moments. Perhaps, this is my way of coping with the trauma of Viet Nam. I guess I could have been blessed with a vivid memory, at the expense of becoming an alcoholic.*[49]

Despite its challenges, memory remains essential to the soldier's ability to revisit the landscape of his past, and by extension to inform the national collective understanding of war. Sassoon acknowledged that as troublesome as memory can be, soldier-authors must grapple with it. Memory's benefits to war history, in his

47 Memory as "discoloured and lacunary" comes from: Blunden, *Undertones of War*, xli; Trench laughter comes from: Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 53; Two privates wrestling and front action comes from: Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 39; "*'…horror mellows and recedes.'*": Sassoon, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer*, 170.

48 "*'…chosen to forget.'*": Robert David Clark to Tim O'Brien, March 16, 1990, Box 17, Folder 2, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; *"…but corpses."*: Charles Conway to Tim O'Brien, n.d., Box 18, Folder 1, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin; The emails are an interesting study of Sassoon's idea that sometimes strange things stick to memory and central things do not. For many of the Alpha Company guys, faces remain vivid, but names have been lost. They cannot remember where they were on the map, but they know the color of the soil and the types of plants that surrounded their foxholes. They know exactly which part of their friend's body was shredded by a mine, but cannot recall whether he survived the war or not.

49 Emails between Alpha Company members between 2007-2009 were referenced from Box 51, Folder 2, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

view, were great enough, and constructive enough, to outweigh memory's hazards. "History [is] not always to be interpreted from utterances of statesmen," he argued, because "true history [is] written from within." O'Brien shared this sentiment, later writing that "the most powerful influence on my work was not a literary one. It was the fucking war. It was the replay afterward. I wrote my stories to interrogate my own nightmares, my own frozen and inarticulate memory." His emails with Alpha Company reveal his emphatic preference for dealing with memory, imperfections and obstacles included, given that escaping memory meant losing his own personal history. O'Brien also generally contends that while the instability of personal memory presents difficulties, it is no more problematic than "straight," factual history. "History itself has got its stability problems," he argues, because "history is written by human beings. It's selective." In O'Brien's view, history can never entirely escape selectivity or imperfection because every author, not solely the soldier-author, brings his own personal beliefs, opinions, ideologies, and memories to bear on his judgements of what is historically important, and what warrants elimination. This defense equates factual record and personal memory not in the way they depict war, but rather in the value they add to those depictions. Crucial and at times revelatory historical details can emerge at the level of the individual which are hidden by objectivity. Personal memory, therefore, plays as critical a role in recording the past as abstract history does.[50]

WAR'S AUTHENTIC FICTIONS

> *"You writer types," he said, "you've got long memories."*
> -*TIM O'BRIEN,* The Things They Carried

SASSOON, O'BRIEN, AND OTHERS, capitalized on the literary opportunities presented by memory's fluidity. Memory complicates recollections of war by blurring what seems real and not real, but this serves the soldier-author's insistence that war produced a perpetual feeling of being untethered from any concrete reality. Memory's stuttering, ellipses-filled accounting of the past allows soldier-authors to emphasize that combat occurs not in a continuous, logical progression, but rather in fragments of intense action divided by seemingly random and disconnected occurrences. The elusive nature of truth in memory mirrors the elusive nature of truth in war. In fact, soldier-authors suggest that war truth need not always rely on factual truth. Sassoon called his writing "a record of the effects of the war on the individual man who is forced to experience it." His choice to focus on *effects* rather than *events* was important. In Sassoon's calculation, writing how the war made a soldier *feel* was more vital to rendering the war truthfully than detailing the technical progress of any particular event in the conflict. Thus, a manipulated version of the historical truth could actually produce a more authentic representation of the war.[51]

O'Brien expressed this in his writing by marking the difference between "story-truth" and "happening-truth." These two related but distinct ideas underpin the genre of soldier-authored literature, and account for how manipulating history allows soldier-authors to write war stories that are historically inaccurate but still genuine. A "true war story," as described by O'Brien, does not depend on objective historical truth. "Absolute

50 "*…written from within.*": Personal notes from April 12, n.d., Siegfried Sassoon Papers; "*…frozen and inarticulate memory.*": O'Brien, Dad's Maybe Book, 138; *"…abstract history does."*: Tim O'Brien, personal interview conducted by Rose Kohler, Oct. 2, 2023.
51 "*…forced to experience it.*": Women's League Speech Notes, March 10, n.d., Box 1, Folder "Sassoon, Siegfried Notes [c. 1919]," Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University.

occurrence is irrelevant," he claims, because "a thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth." In fact, O'Brien suggests that memory-based stories are vital to historical recollection because of their ability to:

> *…animate the abstract. To connect the past to the present to the always to the never. To explore, by dramatic hypothesis, that which is inaccessible through document or other record. To test history against imagination. To help us remember, in certain late hours of the night, how we got from where we were to where we are to where we ought to be. To help us feel.*

It is imagination—the manipulation of historical truth using memory—that provides the critical complement to fact in recreating the past authentically (and movingly). The triangulation of story-truth, happening-truth, and history allowed Sassoon to write a fictionalized memoir series that still portrayed a realistic, honest depiction of the war as endured by soldiers. It was also what allowed him and others to capture the war resoundingly in artistic forms like poetry, as opposed to purely in historical scholarship.[52]

Sassoon and O'Brien both show that story-truth, while based on personal memory and lived experience, nevertheless fictionalizes. But why choose to fictionalize personal history, especially when both authors also felt compelled to write nonfiction memoirs? O'Brien contends that fiction offers freedom, allowing soldier-authors the historical space to ensure that particular arguments about war come through clearly and effectively in their writing. While the vigor of the antiwar arguments in O'Brien's own fiction exemplifies this point, Sassoon's writing also makes use of it. Sherston, unlike Sassoon, is not a writer. Fussell suggests that Sassoon's decision not to make Sherston a writer ensured he could more accurately convey the effect of war on a "representative and ordinary man." Sassoon's *Memoirs* series was, according to Fussell, a "pacifist document…and for it to work it must persuade the reader that the condition of the protagonist is not excessively distant from his own." Assigning to Sherston Sassoon-esque poetic impulses risked weakening his power as an emblem of war's universally corruptive nature.[53]

O'Brien maintains that fiction can withstand the "lopsided," "distorted," or "skewed" character of the soldier's personal memory, a conclusion Sassoon also reached. Fiction's forced suspension of disbelief gives the soldier-author space to contend with the unstable, lacunary disposition of his memory without undermining the strength or validity of his narrative. Fiction also has the strength to hold concurrently war's seemingly incompatible and contradictory realities. Relatedly, O'Brien argues that straight, objective history appeals to the head, whereas fiction appeals to the heart, or even the stomach, in ways that provoke stronger and more profound reactions. Historians certainly invoke feelings when they explore personal testimony as evidence, and given that historical events are responsible for the emotionally-rich memories soldier-authors rely on, the straight histories of events remain crucial to a soldier-author's ability to write believable war stories. They are also crucial to the national public memory of war, which ought to include both the accuracy of "happening-truth" and the authenticity of "story-truth." Sassoon, though, would likely support O'Brien's case that it is war's feeling, more than its facts, which turns soldier-authored literature into the "corrective to a national mythology about the efficacy and moral righteousness of killing people for uncertain reasons." Alvin Merricks was blown into a tree in Vietnam in 1969, and the facts look something like the following:

> *MERRICKS, ALVIN (23) – DIED: May 9, 1969, Quang Ngai Province. KIA, Hostile Death. CAUSE: Artillery.*

52 "*…truer than the truth.*": O'Brien, The Things They Carried, 79-80; "*…To help us feel.*": "Remarks on Accepting the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for Historical Fiction" by Tim O'Brien, printed in 1995 Society of American Historians Annual Dinner Program, Box 15, Folder 7, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin. Reading through the speeches, lectures, and notes in O'Brien's personal papers proves just how much he blurs the line between fact and fiction in his work. In addition to reusing themes, he often transplants full sections from his novels into those writings, and vice versa. On page 36 of *The Things They Carried*, for instance, narrator-O'Brien explains that "stories are for joining the past to the future. Stories are for those late hours in the night when you can't remember how you got from where you were to where you are. Stories are for eternity, when memory is erased, when there is nothing to remember except the story."

53 Fussell, introduction to Siegfried Sassoon, *Memoirs of a Fox-Hunting Man*, xx.

While that description is historically accurate, it tells the reader nothing of the authentic truth of war. This leads, instead, to the character of Curt Lemon. Whether author-O'Brien was actually responsible for retrieving Merricks's limbs and internal organs from that tree, as narrator-O'Brien does with Curt Lemon's, is uncertain. That particular detail may be entirely fictional, an invention justified by the knowledge that, unlike an objective account, the book makes no overt claim to factual truth. It does, however, seek to present war's truth. And the fact remains that the image of narrator-O'Brien tossing down the viscous yellow substance that remained of Lemon's guts does a far better job of convincing the average reader that Vietnam, like all war, was simply a gruesome hell.[54]

EPILOGUE

> *To all the memories, may they rest in peace.*
> *-TIM O'BRIEN,* Going After Cacciato

IN APRIL, 1937, SIEGFRIED SASSOON sat down to fill out a questionnaire, sent to him by an editorial department interested in publishing *Sherston's Progress*. By this point, Sassoon knew literary fame. His multiple poetry collections and three fictional war memoirs made his name one of the most celebrated in the post-WWI literary movement. His works were among those chiefly responsible for reshaping the British popular understanding of the war's reality. Thus, at 51, Sassoon had forged a life of considerable significance. When he reached the section of the questionnaire labeled "biographical notes," however, he paused. Thinking for a moment, Sassoon picked up his pen, and wrote only two sentences: "Born 1886. Nearly died in the Great War."[55]

Sassoon's response captured the feeling shared by almost every former soldier—his war was, for better or worse, the single most important event in his life. It altered him in a way that rendered the civilian world permanently unreachable from his stranded spot on the other side of war experience. The traumas from his past shaped his present thoughts, feelings, and motivations. And he was obsessed with memory. That powerful, unsettled, at times fickle gatekeeper to his earlier war days occupied the preeminent position in his psyche. The average combat soldier lived his postwar life with what Sassoon later called the "queer craving to revisit the past and give the modern world the slip."[56]

Over fifty years later, Tim O'Brien sat down to write *The Things They Carried,* a work of fiction he hoped would capture not only what it felt like to endure combat, but also what it felt like to remember the experience. As with Sassoon, it was the overwhelming power of war memory that found its way onto the page.

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54 "'…*killing people for uncertain reasons.*'": Tim O'Brien, personal interview conducted by Rose Kohler, Oct. 2,2023.

55 Editorial Department Questionnaire for Sherston's Progress, April 1, 1937, Box 2, Folder "Questionnaire April 1, 1937," Siegfried Sassoon Papers, General Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. 128.

56 Siegfried Sassoon, *The Old Century and Seven More Years*, (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1938), 128.

When he typed the simple declaration that "it was a war and the war went on," O'Brien distilled what war meant to the surviving soldier. The sentence captured, on the one hand, the truth of battle—war's seemingly endless nature, the continuation of the horror despite all the killing, suffering, and dying that purported to end it. Human lives are sacrificed in the name of lofty but questionable ideals, and the war still goes on. The sentence also, though, expressed that peace is porous. Soldiers bring bits of war home with them, shrapnel embedded not only in their bodies, but also in their memories. Wars continue forever in the minds of combatants. The former soldier's postwar life is characterized by a new multifront battle in which his enemies become time, ignorance, and misunderstanding. Surrounded by those to whom the language of war is unintelligible, the soldier must learn to either translate his war memories, however imperfectly, or carry the crushing weight of those haunted memories entirely on his own. The memories themselves, though, remain unstable, subject to the contestation, inconsistency, and imagination that accompany remembrance. War goes on, and its only certain truth is that there is no such thing as an entirely true war story.[57]

Sassoon and O'Brien, with their conflicted and disillusioned feelings about their wars, were representative of soldiers from WWI and Vietnam in a larger sense. With their literary insistence on the dominance of memory, they articulated the struggles soldiers faced in recollecting their own war experience. They also modeled the use and manipulation of personal combat memory in imaginative literary efforts to force the civilian public to confront particular realities of war. Sassoon and O'Brien prove, too, that writing about war allows—indeed, forces—soldier-authors to grapple with their personal memories of conflict. Externalizing these memories can allow distance, interrogate discomfort, or foster understanding. Though O'Brien claims that his writing has not been a form of therapy, he does admit that it has helped lighten the load of his Vietnam by displacing some of the weight of the conjoined mass of war history and war memory. Sassoon conveyed similar feelings when he acknowledged that writing allowed him to look back at the events of his past more critically than he could when he lived them. And for the large number of combat soldiers who could never quite find the words to express their own memories, the written work of other soldier-authors serves as a kind of mirror, reflecting thoughts, feelings, and events from their own pasts with a clarity and identification they struggle to find elsewhere.[58]

The value of contending with the heavy, fractured, and contradictory nature of war memory using literature is not limited to Sassoon and O'Brien, nor to WWI and Vietnam. War memory may speak in ellipses, but it also speaks across time. Sassoon referenced the classical works of war literature from antiquity, and the WWI poets always wrote with at least some attention turned to the war poetry that preceded them. O'Brien read those works of war memory from WWI. The epigraph to *Going After Cacciato*—"soldiers are dreamers"—quotes Sassoon. When his children were old enough, O'Brien took them to the spot where Wilfred Owen died and made them read his poetry aloud. The veteran responses to O'Brien's works come not only from former Vietnam soldiers, but also from soldiers who fought in WWII, Korea, the Gulf War, Afghanistan, and Iraq. Their wars were different, but as O'Brien found in the soldier-authors from WWI, the substance of their memories is much the same. This explains why, in the aftermath of his tour in Iraq, one particular soldier copied a singular quote from *The Things They Carried* onto a piece of paper, slid it into a nondescript manila envelope, and mailed it to O'Brien. The paper was a color entirely distinct, a result of the fact that it was made not from tree pulp, but from the soldier's old fatigues. The nameless soldier, hoping to express that O'Brien's writing captured his own memories of a war waged long after and far away from Vietnam, decided to copy the author's words onto the only surface he felt they truly belonged—the fabric of war memory itself. [59] ◆

57 "*…it was a war and the war went on.*": O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, 110.
58 "*…mass of war history and war memory.*": Tim O'Brien, personal interview conducted by Rose Kohler, Oct. 2, 2023.
59 The paper with the quote was found in Box 45, Folder 8, Tim O'Brien Papers, Harry Ransom Center, The University of Texas at Austin.

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