In this chapter, I do not distinguish between O’Brien’s comments in 1995 and those in 2005. Prior to my arrival in Austin in 2005, O’Brien reviewed an edited transcript of the 1995 interview (material I planned to use in this interview) and felt that the material could be included in this book without updating. O’Brien also decided that he did not want to review an edited transcript of this combined 1995 and 2005 interview before its publication, stating in an email that “I’ll trust your judgments. Just don’t have time to read and edit, however minor my changes might have been.”

This composite interview emerges from my three sessions with O’Brien in two different cities, ten years apart. As noted in the introduction, Tim and I first met for two three-hour afternoon sessions on July 9 and 10, 1995, in his apartment in Cambridge, Massachusetts, about ten blocks from the Harvard campus. Our third meeting, one four-hour afternoon session, took place on August 13, 2005, in O’Brien’s home (a small 1990s neoclassical villa), which he shares with his wife and two sons and sits adjacent to a fairway of a prestigious golf course in a residential complex outside Austin, Texas. I used the son-soldier-author structure for questions in both the 1995 and 2005 interviews. The 1995 interview focused on the son and soldier portions of O’Brien’s life and an in-depth discussion of his most recent book at the time, In the Lake of the Woods. In the 2005 interview, we updated life information since 1995, explored his military experience in more detail, and then moved into more general questions about his writing and his teaching. The major differences in the two interviews were the settings and the overall atmosphere. The 1995 sessions took place in a sparsely furnished and decorated two-bedroom apartment during a particularly difficult time in O’Brien’s life—a period described in a 1994 article for the New York Times Magazine (“The Vietnam in Me,” New York Times Magazine, October 2, 1994). Then, O’Brien, dressed in T-shirt, work-out shorts, and baseball cap, chain-smoked his way through the two sessions, and
the two of us drank wine, as O'Brien candidly and introspectively discussed his life and writing career. At that time, O'Brien was reluctant to be interviewed (“I’m near the end [granting interviews]. If this isn’t the end, it’s damn close”) and expressed frustration with his writing (“I pretty much have quit. . . I’m still trying. But I’m only trying whenever the mood hits me now, which is once a week for an hour”). Ten years later, O’Brien met me at the door of his expansive and well-furnished home with a big smile and his one-month-old son cradled in his arms. He apologized that we would have to delay the interview for a few minutes while he took care of his sons (the awake Tad in his arms and a napping two-year-old Timmy in another room) until a babysitter arrived. Some things hadn’t changed—the shorts, T-shirt, ever-present baseball cap, and cigarettes (now, however, accompanied by a personal air-purifier). Other things had. Over coffee, we talked in his family room surrounded by books, children’s toys, and a TV set occasionally turned on to check the progress of the 2005 PGA Championship golf tournament. His comments about his life, war, and writing were consistent in tone and substance with remarks made in our 1995 interview, and he presented them in the same lyrical, image-laden voice found in his books. Throughout this afternoon, O’Brien exhibited a joy and contentment with his complex life as father, husband, writer, and even homeowner dealing with the frustrations of a remodeling project. Still expressed on this day, however, were O’Brien’s continuing guilt over his military service in a war he opposed and his anger about government deceit—past and present.

H: Describe growing up in Worthington, Minnesota, and the town’s impact on your development as a person and a writer?

TO: I had and still have mixed feelings about the place. Not just the town itself, but what it represents: all the towns like it, or the values across America that the town embodies—a kind of “know-nothingness” and “not-caringness” about big, important issues. Who’s Ho Chi Minh? And why are we going to Vietnam? Or who cares if there were no weapons of mass destruction? A sort of willingness to go along with whatever the prevailing political and social tenor of the country might be. It’s what Sinclair Lewis [Main Street] wrote about all those years ago, and it’s still present in middle America. We are a product of that era. The town, like other towns, had many great virtues. I had a terrific education in a public school and a safe place to grow up. Bad influences were few; booze, drugs, and that sort of stuff weren’t
strictly policed by parents and schools. All said and done, it’s not a place I was happy with or would want to go back to, nor would I want to go back to a place like it.

H: In some of your writings, you use the term “polyester” in referring to this town. What’s the symbolism of this term?

TO: It’s a symbol for a mindset. I don’t mean it just in a JC Penney way; I mean a JC Penney of the brain, where to get along means to go along and there’s virtually no limit to it. You don’t complain about your president or your country and why people are getting shot. If you, in Worthington, were to show any sympathy, for example, for the Iraqis now or the Vietnamese back then, they’d look at you in a funny way because our troops and our boys are dying. It’s a kind of place where you erase the other side’s casualties, orphans, and widows. It’s the kind of mindset that says it’s okay to be in Iraq; they attacked us—forgetting that they didn’t attack us; they had nothing to do with 9/11. So it’s not just Worthington; it’s the whole country that sort of ticks me off. I go after Worthington only because I know the place well enough to make it particular in the details of it, but it’s representative to me of a whole mindset in this country, the mindset that elected Bush.

H: I read that your father, who was with the navy on a destroyer in the South Pacific during WWII, had written articles about his war experiences that were later published in the New York Times. Did you read these when you were growing up?

TO: Yes, maybe six or seven of these little vignettes. They were all very short. . . . My mom just went back, in the last four months [2005], to Norfolk, Virginia, where she had met my father during World War II. And while she was there, somebody dug up for her one of the many pieces that I had read when I was a kid. But it wasn’t in the New York Times; it was in some navy magazine.

H: Did reading these vignettes at an early age pique your interest in becoming a writer?

TO: Yes, it was probably the first glimmering of a possibility for my life: to see rendered in words by someone you know well, your dad, an experience that you can feel, see, and hear through language, dialogue. They were nicely written, peppy pieces. They had the flavor of World War II in their [references] and the kind of talk. I can’t say I decided I’m going to be a writer, but some of those stuck with me. I never forgot those pieces.

H: Did you and your father talk about these pieces at the time, or did he just give them to you to read?

TO: He didn’t give them to me; my mother did. He told me stories about Iwo Jima, and he talked about the kamikaze attacks and how terrified he was,
and he didn’t make the war seem glorious. He just said that he was scared to death, and yet he had a sense of humor about things that happened aboard the ship. One of my regrets is that, now that he’s gone, I didn’t press him more for detail. But he was a private guy in some ways, and I knew I wasn’t going to get very far. We’d talk about the surface of an event, very glibly almost. But to go much deeper, I was really scared. . . . I never got very far with him, and it might be partly my own fault that I didn’t want to press him.

**H**: Did you play games of war as a child?

**TO**: I played war games out on the golf course as a kid. Sort of war games based on war stories I heard from my dad and stories I heard from adults who had served as foot soldiers in Germany or the Pacific, games based on comic books and on movies. Audie Murphy’s *To Hell and Back* was a movie that impressed me a lot. *Pork Chop Hill* was another movie that impressed me a lot. And as a kid I played these games. I was the American hero, and there were Germans and Japanese out there to be killed, out on that golf course. There was an army surplus store in Worthington that sold relics from WWII and Korea—ammunition belts, helmet liners, canteens, and the like. I would buy these things and strap them on. In that way, the history of earlier wars influenced the games I played as a kid. Also, the games I played as a kid in some respects reflected my self-image: “Tim the Hero” just like the Lone Ranger—“Tim the Lone Ranger.” That whole constellation of imagination and history, those heroes from both sources, combined in my head to form a self-portrait of sorts that suggested when the time came I would be physically and morally brave.

**H**: What were some of the books that you read as a child?

**TO**: As a very young person I was big on Grimm’s Fairy Tales. I read *Tom Sawyer* when I was very young. I read *Huckleberry Finn* when I was very young, not reading it the way that you read it in college, but just reading it as a story. I remember reading little Wonder Books, those tiny books for kids, from the time I was six to about nine. *Timmy Is a Big Boy Now* was my favorite Wonder Book. The book is still around. I saw it in a friend’s house; his son’s name is Tim. *Larry of the Little League* was influential. I played Little League as a kid in Worthington, Minnesota, and that book really caught my attention. Made me try my hand at my first work of fiction called “Timmy of the Little League.” I think I was ten or eleven when I wrote this little thirty-page piece, what I called a novel.

**H**: In various places, you have talked about your interest in magic as a young-ster. How did this interest develop?
TO: Books again, through the library. I remember checking out a number of books on magic from the Worthington Public Library. I don’t remember the titles of any of these books, but I can picture the covers. When I was ten or eleven years old, I began practicing the hobby fairly rigorously, every day. On trips to New York City that we took periodically for my dad, insurance conventions, I visited Lou Tannon’s Magic Store in New York City, which was a mecca for big-time magicians where real illusions were sold, expensive illusions. And I would always end up getting a twenty- or thirty-dollar trick. My father would buy it for me.

Magic for me was a way of escaping the world at that time. It was a terrible time at home—my sense of not being loved, my father’s alcoholism, my feeling lonely. So I think that it was a form of escape, of trying to change that world, that mad world, a little bit—making miracles happen, a way of earning applause.

H: During your childhood and teenage years, did you have any particular heroes?

TO: Oh, sure. There were all sorts of heroes—heroes out of the imaginary world. Huck Finn getting on that raft was a hero, escaping the social conventions of small town Missouri. And I wanted to get the hell out of small town Minnesota. There were no rivers to float away on, so I imagined other means. But, nevertheless, Huck was a hero of mine. As a youngster, I had imaginary heroes like every young kid: Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, the Lone Ranger—cowboy heroes. They were the kind of hero who knew right from wrong and was willing to act on this knowledge to the point of risking his life. I also had real-life heroes. Those were sporting types. Ted Williams was a big hero of mine, also a first baseman for the New York Yankees named Bill “Moose” Skowron, because he played once for the Austin, Minnesota, Packers and I was born in Austin, Minnesota.

H: Any political figures as heroes?

TO: President Kennedy was a hero of mine as a high school student. I actually went to Minneapolis to listen to a speech he gave. So I wasn’t just a long-distance worshiper. I really admired his politics, but I’m not so sure that I’d be such a fan today. Back then, notions like the Peace Corps meant a lot to me. His seeming elegance of style meant a lot to me, the way that he carried himself, his wit, his intelligence. All those qualities impressed me and still do. I’m not so sure some of his politics impress me as much now as they did back then.

H: Did your family spend time discussing books, politics, ideas, religion, values?
TO: Yes, those things came up constantly at the dinner table. Their reference points usually were such things as movies, TV programs, articles in magazines, books, and so on. And then the discussion would move from the particular to the general: from an article on the hydrogen bomb to a discussion of whether we were up against a nuclear war or whether Worthington would be hit and what the consequences might be from fallout. I remember this issue being a continuing one at fourteen, fifteen, sixteen years old. Politics was discussed a lot, especially during the Kennedy and early Johnson years. Religion was discussed in a fully heated way. My father was a lapsed Catholic. My mother was a Methodist. My father certainly scoffed at religions of all sorts—especially Catholicism. My mother was a staunch defender of “meat and potatoes” Midwestern religion. You go to church every Sunday.

H: Did you and your brother and sister go to church?

TO: We went to church [Methodist] up until the time of going away to college. My father would sometimes go, but most often not. If he did go, it would be kicking and screaming.

H: Describe your relationship with your father during these years of growing up at home. What were the particular tensions? Was he a model or a guide for you?

TO: It was a difficult relationship, like everything, complicated. On one hand he was a model—his intelligence, his wit, his grace in public, an extremely stylish guy. A charming man. His capacity to devour books and to understand what he was reading impressed me and does to this day. His judgments about literature impressed me then and to this day still do. His judgments were ordinarily pretty black and white, but they were firm; they were heartfelt, not wishy washy. They were not complicated, but firm. And he had good reasons for them. Those things impressed me.

We had a lot of problems, too. I was picked on a lot as a kid. For reasons that I still don’t understand teased relentlessly, at least it seemed to me, from the time I was nine years old until I left for college. I felt that I was never good enough for him, could never please him no matter what I had accomplished. And to this day, I still don’t understand what it was that didn’t please him. I wanted desperately to win his love, affection, and esteem but never seemed to be able to do it, no matter what I did in the world. He was an alcoholic, bad alcoholic, institutionalized a couple of times. His alcoholism hurt me deeply. That is, it changed his personality so radically that it made him very hard to be with. That had a lot to do with his taunting of me and his nonstop teasing. He could detect how much I despised the
change in personality that he would go through, and because he could detect it, he would call me on it.

Dinner would be especially difficult because he would sometimes begin drinking after work, and by the time dinner came around, he would be sullen and way inside himself. And the man that I loved and adored, the charming and stylish guy, had vanished. That was a horrible, horrible time in my life, all through junior high and high school. He would vanish into institutions, and I would wonder when he was coming back—if he was coming back and in what condition. I was always hoping for some radical change that never came about.

H: What were some of the things he teased you about?

TO: Weight was one thing. He would taunt me about my response to his alcoholism in a sense. He could feel my disgust at his drinking and would turn it on me in a funny way: “What’s wrong? What’s wrong with you?”

I want to say a couple of things, though. I hope you downplay some of this information as much as you can. I don’t mind you using this stuff, but I don’t want to make it appear as if this guy was all foul. He had many, many virtues. And I want to make sure that those virtues balance the negative aspects of my dad’s problem. Among his virtues was his intelligence; he was also well-read. He was extremely supportive of me in things like Little League and managing the team. Played ball with me all the time. Taught me to golf. Took me golfing with him all the time. Took me on trips with him when he would go out and sell insurance. A lot of times when he was sober he was a terrific father. And I want to make it real clear that his influence on me was probably dominantly affirmative as opposed to dominantly negative, but coming across in our conversation, because we are spending so much time on it, is the dominantly negative. It was the opposite. It was a dominantly positive influence.

H: Your father died in August 2004; what was your relationship with him like the last ten years?

TO: It improved, substantially. In his old age he became more loving and open. He stopped drinking in large part because he couldn’t anymore; he was so sick. He had all kinds of things wrong with him. But it became much more loving over the last ten years, openly so. It was always loving; it became more demonstrative.

H: Related to your growing up, one of the historical events that becomes important in two of your books (Northern Lights and The Nuclear Age) has to do with the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962). Do you remember what you were thinking at the time when this event occurred?
TO: Very much so. I was in a play. I think it was called the *Curious Savage*. The play was about a bunch of inmates in a mental institution and all their odd dreams. I was a character who wished to be a violinist, but couldn’t play the violin. And there was a woman who wanted a baby desperately, but couldn’t have a baby, and so on. I remember doing the dress rehearsals for this play, and the crisis kept escalating throughout the dress rehearsals until the night the play was to be given for the first time to the public. That combination of the mental instability, which was in the play, with the instabilities in the world at the time—the fragilities in the world and the fragilities in these personalities we were depicting—will never go away. That combination will be in my memory forever. The two are locked forever. And it’s an interesting lock. It’s not as if one were playing hopscotch at the time. It’s a meaningful, important association.

H: Any additional details about your family important in understanding your development as a writer?

TO: I think the fact that my mom was a schoolteacher, an elementary school teacher, had a lot to do with my interest in books, reading, grammar, and things like that. That she cared about where the commas, apostrophes, and dashes go, things that in the long run make a huge difference to a writer. Without a command of English, you cannot fulfill yourself as a writer. You can’t make full use of the English repertoire. I think, too, that my father, who was on the library board and an avid reader, was a huge influence, bringing books into the house—stacks of them—from the time I was very young until the time I left home to go to college. There were always books around, and I would pick them up and read them.

H: Did this period of your life contribute to your development as an author in other ways?

TO: In myriad ways, so many ways that it’s impossible to articulate anything more important than another. The threads are not only numerous, but they are also incredibly important in my work: the father theme, the theme of heroism, the theme of history and war. There’s the theme of loneliness and alienation. There’s the theme of the importance of imagination in our lives as a way to escape and to change the world. There’s also the theme of magic that runs through all of my work, even the most realistic of my work like *If I Die*. That is to say, artistry is a kind of trickery or a kind of illusion building. Those are just big chunks of my books that have their sources in childhood.

H: After graduating from high school, why did you choose to attend Macalester College?
TO: Macalester turned out to be a terrific college for me to go to. I would have been killed by the University of Chicago [first choice], especially after seeing the place physically. Macalester is a place where I feel I blossomed intellectually. Studied hard. Learned a lot. Took it extremely seriously. Got great grades. In high school I was a cut below the best in my class. However, at Macalester, I blossomed as if my IQ improved for some odd reason. Partly it was the sense of freedom, being away from that crummy little town of Worthington. Partly, it was a sense of freedom from any sense of parental—especially my dad’s—pressures. It was a real awakening.

H: At Macalester, in addition to the novel you wrote in 1967 while on an exchange program, did you do any other writing at this time—college newspaper, literary magazines?

TO: I wrote for the newspaper, about what I can’t recall, and wrote a couple of poems.

H: At this time, were you planning to be a writer?

TO: That’s a good question. I’m not sure. I know I’d always wanted to be one. It was in the back of my head from the time I saw those pieces by my dad and read that book Larry of the Little League. It never went away. I was conscious of it. But it seemed to be an impossible, almost fantastical, vision of myself that couldn’t ever really happen. Why I felt that way I’m not sure. I liked writing, and I was reasonably good at it, even as a kid. I wasn’t good, but I was better than most. But it just seemed that some things were done in Philadelphia, New York, L.A., and Chicago by people from those places and not by a kid from the Turkey Capital of the World, as ridiculous as that is. So I wasn’t planning on being a writer, but I always wanted to be.

H: Describe attitudes (yours and your fellow students’) about the Vietnam War.

TO: I was opposed to it. There were active campus debates. Macalester wasn’t a radical school. That is to say, it wasn’t full of Communists and SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] types. But it was an extremely politically conscious school, partly because of the [Walter] Mondale and [Hubert H.] Humphrey connections to the school and partly because some of the professors at the school were well known in Minnesota politics. A fellow named Ted Mitau had written numerous textbooks that were and still are well known. He later became chancellor of the Minnesota State University system. It was a highly politicized school, and the war was debated in campus forums. I personally took part in many of these debates, stood in peace vigils, and rang doorbells for Gene McCarthy when he ran for president.

H: Why did you become so actively involved in the Eugene McCarthy campaign?

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TO: I can't say that I was all that active. I wasn't an everydayer. I was a weekender. Why involved? I guess because the war seemed ill-conceived and wrong. At the time, McCarthy was the only candidate who had taken a political stand against the war. I remember right after he announced for the presidency, he spoke in Macalester's field house, and it was jammed with supporters. It was a heady occasion. I was full of hope. I was a children's crusader in my soul. I wanted that war ended so badly. But I wanted it ended through legitimate political means, a view that separated me in that year, 1968, from the years that followed '69, '70, '71, when more and more violent means were both advocated and used by students and by the Rubins [Jerry] and the Hoffmans [Abbie] and the Yippie movement, whom I had no sympathy for and had no relationship with. My attitude was an old-fashioned liberal attitude: change is effected though legitimate political means—caucuses, elections, and so on.

H: How did this period of your life in college—people, events—influence who you are and contribute to your development as a writer?

TO: In a couple of traditional ways. One that we haven’t touched on was that I took some terrific courses in English [although a political science major] at Macalester, taught by wonderful professors: Roy Swanson, Harley Henry, Roger Blakley. Courses in the modern novel and American colonial literature. I remember going through Ulysses in a study group indexing the book, bit by bit by bit, mapping that book out. I had my first exposure to Faulkner and The Sound and the Fury, to Hemingway and The Sun Also Rises, to Dos Passos, and to Fitzgerald. I also read a lot of Hawthorne and the American colonial period writers. I was excited about literature in a way that I hadn’t been prior to taking these courses. I had read a lot as a kid, was interested in books in general, but I had liked them for story and for what they would do to me emotionally. But the technical aspects of fiction excited me in college for the first time. I have a feeling that had I not taken those courses and not had those great professors, I wouldn’t be a novelist today.

H: In the early and mid-1960s, what was the general attitude of the people in Worthington about the Vietnam War? Did these attitudes influence your own thinking about the war and the draft?

TO: Well, I’ve written about this extensively in The Things They Carried. It was the sense of the town watching me that made me go to the war—the fear of embarrassment. I didn’t want to feel embarrassed in front of not just the
town but maybe Minnesota as a whole or maybe beyond that the whole country. The [Worthington] mindset was one of saying, “Well, you’re supposed to serve your country, and you’re supposed to obey the laws of your country, including the Selective Service laws, and go to the war.” Civil disobedience, for example, wasn’t big in Worthington, and it’s not big in that mindset. It would be inexplicable in that mindset. So in a negative way, Worthington sent me off and made me a writer. It sent me to the war and made me do things I should not have done: to not listen to my own conscience but rather listen to the conscience of this [judgmental] organism and obey it.

H: At home, did your parents talk about the war?

TO: I’m sure that it was talked about. But I sure don’t recall anything that was said, not a word. I know that in general both my mom and dad were skeptical of the war. But that’s all I recall. The degree of their skepticism I just don’t know. I know that once I was drafted, they were damn skeptical of the war. Once I was over there, they wanted that war over.

H: Did you think about securing draft counseling about options to avoid the draft?

TO: No, my thoughts were thoughts of the imagination and fantasy. I would fantasize that I was going to Canada, crossing the Rainy River. I’d fantasize getting in my car and just driving away. They were fantasy kinds of thoughts. They were elaborate fantasies. They were waking fantasies. I would imagine what I would have to pack, what documents I would have to bring, what clothes I would bring along, where I would leave the car, and the note I would leave for my parents. I mean they were elaborate heuristic exercises.

H: Both of your parents were WWII veterans, and you spent so much of your young life playing war games on the golf course and reading about war and acts of heroism. But when you came face to face with the Vietnam War, you were against the war. Was your opposition strictly political?

TO: From a political, humanistic ground, not just politics. It seemed a barbarous, inhuman war, a war fought for uncertain reasons. War, in my opinion, having read a lot of Aquinas, requires some sort of just cause, like WWII. . . . My thoughts were that Vietnam did not have a clear, just cause behind it. It was a war containing a myriad of ambiguities: legal, philosophical, moral, historical, and ambiguities of fact, pure fact. What happened in the Gulf of Tonkin [August 1964] on those two separate nights? What really happened? There was so much ambiguity reflected in the national response to that war. There was much ambiguity of support for the war.
That ambiguity grew more and more gray as time went on to the point where it became really conspicuous that there wasn’t a lot of political support for the war. My thought then, and it remains to this day, is that you don’t kill people and you don’t die when everything is so ambiguous. There wasn’t some sense of consensus on the side of rectitude for that war.

H: Paul Fussell in *The Great War and Modern Memory* analyzes WWI memoirs and comments on their basic three-part structure of prewar innocence, battlefield experience and disillusionment, and then a post-battlefield consideration stage. In your war memoir, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, you definitely portray the experience stage, and you obviously have a consideration stage. But the innocence stage (the romantic notions of war) is missing.

TO: There’s not an innocent stage. I didn’t go to war as an innocent. I went to war knowing, at least convinced, that the Vietnam War was ill-conceived and morally wrong. That was my conviction. I didn’t go to war an innocent. I went to war a “guilt,” that is to say “guilt” being a sort of weird noun. I was not an innocent, I was a “guilt.” I knew that the war was wrong. I wasn’t a Henry Fleming [*The Red Badge of Courage*]. I wasn’t a Caputo or a Kovic [*Born on the Fourth of July*]. I wasn’t a Paul Baumer [*All Quiet on the Western Front*]. My situation was different, and it separates me from a lot of veterans to this day.

It doesn’t make me better or worse, but different, in the sense that I believed that the war was wrong and I went to it anyway. I didn’t go to the war with a sense that I was going to prove my own courage, for reasons of glory, for reasons of adventure, for patriotic reasons—a lot of the variables that send men off to war that are so conspicuous in most literature about Vietnam and other wars. In my case, these didn’t apply.

H: Once you entered the military, what was basic training like?

TO: It wasn’t the Boy Scouts for me; it was god-awful. In some ways, my memories of basic training are more horrific than my memories of Vietnam. The principal way was the humiliation, the constant ridicule that everyone in basic training went through. You are debased in all sorts of ways. It drove me crazy. That’s the intent, obviously, to make you a little bit less than human, to take away your individual characteristics so as to mold you into a group. I understood the process intellectually, but I still despised it. I despised the individuals who did it, that is to say, the drill sergeants. I hated their guts. I really despised them. I thought they were evil creatures. I mean genuinely evil. And to this day, one in particular, I still think he is evil. This man, his name is Guyton. I wish I knew his first name. I’d tell you. Drill Sergeant G-U-Y-T-O-N. I called him Blyton in *If I Die*. That sense of being debased and humiliated day after day after day after day I found to be...
absolutely despicable, and I thought it was taken way beyond what was re-
quired. The physical pain of basic training exceeded the physical pain of 
Vietnam: the sleeplessness of basic, the long marches, the night marches 
in particular, the forced marches in general, and the craving for food. We’d 
just die for a decent meal, instead being hustled through that mess hall— 
two bites and you’re out. Always hungry. The regimentation of it all I hated. 
When it comes to regimentation of behavior, regimentation of attitude, 
regimentation of all sorts of ways, basic training exceeded anything I ex-
perienced in Vietnam, and I despised it. Those aspects of basic training I re-
ally hated to the point where I felt increasing depression that went beyond 
the norm. And it’s possible that my basic training unit was a bit out of the 
ordinary. Having talked to people who have also gone through basic, I 
found their experience wasn’t as bad as mine. There was a certain kind of 
camaraderie that they felt and a certain jovial attitude that they felt toward 
it all that our unit didn’t feel.

H: In terms of the humiliation and horror, was your AIT at Fort Lewis any dif-
ferent from your experiences in basic training?

TO: It was worse in some ways. Easier in the sense that the humiliation stuff 
was over. Even the physical aspect got easier, probably because you’re in 
such good shape after basic. Spiritually it was probably worse than basic 
because once I was assigned an infantry MOS and was in AIT, I knew that 
‘Nam was a certainty. In basic I had modest hopes that they would make me 
a clerk, truck driver, typist, or something. So spiritually I plodded through 
AIT in kind of a daze, even worse than in basic. My best friend Eric [men-
tioned in If I Die], for example, wasn’t around to talk to, so I was with a 
bunch of guys I didn’t know, didn’t much like, and with this stone hard 
knowledge that I’d be a foot soldier in Vietnam.

H: How did you manage to survive, psychologically, both basic training and 
AIT?

TO: I imagine in the same way that people survive concentration camps, peo-
ple at GITMO [Guantánamo Detainment Camp] do now. You hold onto the 
slenderest bit of hope, the slenderest bit of ambition for yourself. Even 
though at times it feels you’re just holding onto a little cobweb, you hold on 
for all you’re worth. It’s kind of a literary explanation, but it’s as close to the 
truth as I can get. You find some little strand inside you of strength, the way 
a cobweb is small but it’s strong. In my case it’s sort of your “Tim O’Brien-
ness,” the person that you value. There’s just a little bit of it left, but it’s 
strong and you just hold onto it—making promises to yourself, “I’ll try to 
comport myself with some dignity.”
H: What did you learn about yourself during these first two stages of training?

TO: Well, I learned a lot of bad things about myself that I would do—go to a war I shouldn’t go to, a pretty big thing. When I was a kid, I imagined I’d always do the right thing, the thing that I believed was right. That I would have the courage to say no if I were asked to do something I considered dishonorable or evil. And to learn that my sense of personal self wasn’t strong enough to show that kind of courage was a rude awakening.

I learned a few good things about myself. One was that I could endure—hold onto that little thread I was talking about. I’m not a big guy. I’m not an outdoorsy guy, and I learned that I could do it if I had to do it. I could physically handle it, and that’s something you learn about yourself. I know it sounds trivial, but it’s something that you do learn. It takes a kind of courage just to make your legs move, especially when you’re walking through minefields and getting shot at. The temptation to fall is always there, and I think probably for almost everyone. And by fall I mean quite literally just stop walking.

H: In If I Die you have that chapter about endurance as a type of courage.

TO: It really is something that’s overlooked, and that’s why I mention it again. It was a kind of learning for me. I didn’t know it was a kind of courage, and if I had known, I wouldn’t have known that I was capable of doing it. I would have suspected, “Well, if it’s that bad, why don’t you just fall down and not move and let a helicopter take you away and there’s the end of it. Let them do to you what they want.”

H: In contrast, the Audie Murphy and John Wayne war movies present a different type of courage: the unthinking courage that you talk about in If I Die, a courage without wisdom or understanding—the “charge-up-the-hill” courage.

TO: Yes. And I despise that. That is to say I learned it as a kid and practiced it on the golf course. It was a childhood value that changed through junior high, into high school, and into college. I thought [in college] it was ridiculous and stupid to die for glory, to die for honor, to die for reasons that seemed to me less than fully human.

H: What did you learn about the military during these first two stages of training?

TO: I learned that all the novels I’d ever read about it were right on the money, and all the nonfiction as well. It’s racist, straighthlaced, thoughtless, mindless; I can’t think of enough adjectives to pile on, holier-than-thou, presumptuous, complacent. I wish I could think of enough derogatory adjectives, but I gave you a few of them. I really learned to hate it.
H: Did these periods of training prepare you in any way for Vietnam?

TO: I suppose in a way. I’m not sure in what way. It’s hard to believe that it wouldn’t in some way, but not in any important, life-saving way. More in a behavioral way.

H: Describe the first few days in country—people, procedures; did you go through in-country training? What were you feeling at this point?

TO: I went from Cam Ranh Bay to Chu Lai, and at Chu Lai I went through seven days of what they called the “now or never training,” which was nothing. Walking through make-believe minefields with no ordinance around. . . . Mostly, I remember feeling incredibly lonely and displaced in the sense that “God, this is real.”

H: What were your initial impressions of the land, Vietnamese people, fellow soldiers, overall atmosphere of the place?

TO: The overall atmosphere I tried to capture in the chapters in Cacciato, which are rendered fully realistic. The smell of the place. The faint smell of mildew and mustiness. I remember that. I remember the sense of dawn breaking, which I wasn’t used to. I’m a late sleeper, at least I had been. Seeing every dawn break and that mildewy smell, I had a sense of imminent doom with me at all times. Even at Chu Lai, a big safe American base, I wondered if my next step would be my last or if they really swept the place for mines. I remember at night watching from a distance the gunships off the Batangan Peninsula, maybe ten miles away, putting down sheets of red flame and thinking, “My God, I’m going to be out there at some point soon.” I remember the nonstop sound of artillery, booming constantly, supporting the companies and the platoons out in the field. After seven days I and maybe ten other guys got on a truck, and the truck took us down Highway 1 to my final firebase, which was LZ Gator south of Chu Lai about seven miles.

H: Did you begin your tour as an RTO [radio-telephone operator]?

TO: No, I was a rifleman for February, March, and April [1969]. Sometime in April I carried the radio for the lieutenant of the 3rd Platoon. Not much later Captain Anderson enlisted me to carry one of the company radios. There were two. There’s the battalion radio where you’re in contact with battalion headquarters. Another guy carries a radio that is in contact with the various platoons. I carried the battalion radio.

H: I would think that for someone interested in storytelling, this would be the perfect job. In a sense, weren’t you listening to stories over the radio and also telling stories?

TO: We were telling stories, too, a lot of them. That is to say, real made-up stories as if we were out on ambush.
H: When the unit didn’t go out, even though ordered to do so?

TO: When the unit didn’t go out, acting a little bit.

H: Did you have to make up those reports, or did the captain feed you the information?

TO: No, I knew we weren’t out on ambush. It was assumed that I would call back and pretend that we were.

H: You would have to call in situation reports?

TO: Situation reports every hour. It’s over in a second. You make your voice real quiet: “This is blah, blah, blah. Sit rep negative.” Very quiet, matter of fact. Every hour you do that. I should qualify this by saying we were in dangerous positions anyway. We were out in either company- or platoon-sized units, out in real hideous country. Quang Ngai Province was really a shit-kicker of a province. I didn’t know this then, but all my reading since then (including Jonathan Schell’s work on the province [The Military Half]) indicates that Quang Ngai was a heavily, ardently VC province from way, way back—back to the Vietminh era. Seventy percent of the land and structures in Quang Ngai had been destroyed by ’67 through bombing and displacement. It was really a horrible, fucking place. So when we were faking ambushes, we were still in the shit. We just weren’t quite as much in the shit as if we were out in a squad on ambush. It wasn’t that often. It was once every three weeks we would fake an ambush.

H: Describe the people in your frontline unit—highly motivated, apathetic, scared?

TO: God, it’s really impossible to generalize. They were all the things you said at different times. The same person would be scared, then macho, then playful, then nasty, much of it as in life I suppose—but heightened. The nastiness was nastier, and the playfulness was more playful, and the nostalgia was more nostalgic. Everything was magnified because of the stakes involved, death all around and maybe I’ll die, and the horrors of taking lives. The contradictions in personality magnified by the stakes and by the kind of open-door policy toward moral behavior that anything goes. Torture, burning people’s houses, and acts of generosity, too, were magnified. Guys giving up lives for Coca-Cola, for the pickiest things.

H: Larry Heinemann talks about widespread drug use among the enlisted men in his unit. Did you encounter drug use in your unit?

TO: Damn little. I think it really depended on partly when you were there but also partly on your unit. [Heinemann] was in a track unit, and there’s a certain safety you don’t have when you’re out in the bush day after day that you may have in a track. I think most of us were just so terrified. We were so
close to the ground all the time, so terrified of losing someone, where's my buddy? It’s hard to lose a track, a big armored vehicle. But it's easy to lose a guy, especially at night, the guy next to you. And you’re so afraid of getting lost, physically lost and separated from your fellow soldiers. There was some drug use. I don’t mean to say there was none, but it was all dope. That I know. There were no hard drugs, as far as I know, in my unit.

H: Were fraggings ever discussed?
T: Well there was one that I wrote about [If I Die]. It wasn’t a hand grenade, but it was an M-79 grenade where a black guy had blooped a first sergeant who had come out to the field. The first sergeant was white, and the first sergeant was giving all of the rear jobs to the white guys and none to black guys. [The black soldier] didn’t kill him. He ended up hurting him badly.

H: After seven months in the field, you were assigned to a job in the rear at battalion headquarters as a clerk. How did you get this assignment?
T: I don’t know quite how I got it. I know my company commander, who’s called Johansson in If I Die, thought highly of me, and he may well have, after he left the field, put in a good word. That would be my guess. I didn’t want to ask. I should clarify, though, this base [LZ Gator] was just a little hill. It was a forward-fire support base. And in some ways, I was more afraid of that place because in the field there’s credible field discipline. You know it’s dangerous, but in LZ Gator, where there are maybe three hundred guys at a time, people took comfort in numbers and in some barbed wire strung around you. But when we were attacked, maybe eight times, it was much worse than in the field. Guys shooting every which way, I mean across the hill at one another. There was an attack, and I can’t remember how many of our guys were killed, but it was many, including our lieutenant colonel, who ran our battalion. So it [this job] wasn’t like being in Saigon or Long Binh. It was in some ways scarier because you’d see this lackadaisical attitude and guys walking around with weapons. In the field, you’d put your weapon on safety and have your thumb on it so you could get it off in a hurry. But here they’d just leave the weapon on, and they wouldn’t even know it was on. In some ways it was scarier than the field because of the absence of discipline. It was like being in a bad high school, where the monitors and the principals left, all the bullies have taken over, and there’s horseplay with lethal stuff. That was the feel of LZ Gator.

H: The hamlet of My Lai and its surrounding area called “Pinkville” by American soldiers (due to the color on military maps), as well as the My Lai Massacre (which occurred almost a year prior to your arrival in Vietnam),
obviously have had considerable impact on you personally, as well as on your writing. Why?

TO: Probably the physical place of Pinkville, how beat up it was and scarred and mangled. How hostile the remaining villagers were. There weren’t many left, but those who did remain in those villages, My Khe and My Lai, were hostile. You could smell it and taste it in the air. As a company, we were terrified whenever we were sent into this area. It was full of land mines, just littered with land mines. The odds were very high that somebody would hit a mine when we were out there. You prayed to God it wouldn’t be you. There was no strong enemy to fight. That is to say, we never faced any battalion, even though we were searching for the mythical 48th Mekong Battalion. We never found them, never even saw them as far as I know. We never had any fire from them. We were getting a lot of sniper fire, a lot of short little firefightes. Mostly it was just mine after mine after mine after mine after mine after mine after mine after mine. The land just blew us to smithereens. We were afraid of the physical place the way kids are afraid of closets or darkness under the bed. The “bogeyman” feel of that place still haunts me. I still dream about the physical place. I don’t dream about events that occurred, but I dream stories that happened in that hell—devastation and ghosts, the ghosts being the ghosts of My Lai. But they are not just from My Lai. The ghosts are from what happened prior to my getting there in terms of the bombing of the place, the wreckage of this area, the dislocation of all the villagers. They were taken out of the villages and put into little tin huts, concentration-camp villages. My Lai was a place where evil had occurred, conspicuously had occurred. You could tell by the wreckage all around you, even prior to the My Lai story breaking in the news.

H: One theme that links soldier-author James Jones’s novels and nonfiction books about war is his focus on a “soldier’s evolution”: “this psychic process culminates when soldiers accept their own insignificance in the larger scheme of things and thus subordinate personality, repress civilian habits of mind, and accept anonymity in death” (James Jones, WWII, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1975, 54). Did you observe such an evolution take place among your own men and you?

TO: I certainly didn’t experience it. If I had bet, I would have bet I would have died. So I would have said, the day I arrived in country, “Tim, a hundred dollars, are you going to make it or not?” I would have bet, no; I’m not going to make it. Probably because I didn’t know what the hell I was doing. I wasn’t a Boy Scout and all that stuff. I didn’t like guns. I hadn’t paid much attention during basic training and AIT. I just learned the basics, and that
was it, always hoping somehow I’d be rescued and I wouldn’t have to go. But I never resigned myself [to death]. That’s what I meant by that little slender cord I was hanging onto, my “Tim O’Brien-ness,” that somehow I would not just make it through physically and come home, but that I would salvage something from it. That was my main resolve in basic, AIT, and in Vietnam. I didn’t know there’d be writing. If I’d have guessed, I would have said probably, but I didn’t know. . . So almost the opposite of resignation, I was determined that somehow I would not just survive, but I would take all this terror and criminality and murderous stuff, and I would find some way to salvage something from it. That’s what got me through, not just the war but also through the earlier stages and maybe got me through the stages when I came home too. I came home disconnected and not knowing what I would do with respect to what I’d been through, but knowing I’d do something with it to try to make something good out of this horror called Vietnam.

H: And making something good out of it turned out to be writing about it.

TO: Turned out to be that way. I didn’t know that for sure at the time. But that’s what it turned out to be, fairly quickly.

H: Many excellent pieces of war literature focus on the heart-of-darkness experience of soldiers—in particular, episodes of soldiers losing control and in a primitive fashion revealing the evil side that resides in us all. You seem to describe such experiences in If I Die and In the Lake of the Woods; were these experiences similar to Conrad’s descriptions of Kurtz’s experiences in his novella Heart of Darkness?

TO: Well, Heart of Darkness isn’t even the equivalent of this. Heart of Darkness has to do with kind of natural savagery, kind of primitive. This was an imposed savagery, not indigenous, but imposed by years and years of bombs, napalm, artillery fire, physical dislocation, and massacre. These acts caused, among the populace that we were trying to save, not just anger, but incredible sorrow and grief that was palpable as you walked around this place. And the response to all the savagery on the part of the enemy was to litter the place with land mines and blow the shit out of us. The place was blown to shit anyway, so why not blow some more?

H: I was also thinking of soldiers in your unit having a heart-of-darkness experience in suddenly understanding the depths of evil residing within them. Or is such a description simplifying the experience too much?

TO: I think it is. I don’t think we felt that. I think that by and large we felt incredible terror mixed with a kind of ignorance. How did this place become the way it is? All we saw was devastation. We knew nothing about what had
caused it. We didn’t know that Americans had done it all. We thought, “Maybe this is how people have lived here forever, poverty and wreckage.” We knew nothing of the My Lai business. One has to remember that My Lai was not just one event. It was two events on the same day. There were two separate massacres in two separate places done by elements of the same unit on the same day. About all this we were ignorant. All we did know was that the place was incredibly hostile, incredibly dangerous, and incredibly spooky. I don’t think we felt any evil inside us. We felt mostly terror and ignorance rather than the capacity to commit evil.

H: Conrad in Heart of Darkness also comments on the inexplicable “fascination of the abomination” (the attraction of evil). Did you experience or observe any of this phenomenon while in Vietnam? Does this fascination ever emerge as a theme in any of your writing?

TO: Regarding the attractive qualities of war, I’ve acknowledged them [in my stories] . . . but in the final analysis one must come down—decisively and hard—on one side or the other. And I come down hard on the antiwar side. . . . Most of the so-called virtues of combat . . . take on their primary value in hindsight, after the horrid fact, and often have the artificially sweetened taste of nostalgia. Those virtues do not cross one’s mind when a landmine explodes, or when a friend dies, or when one is engaged in a firefight. At such moments it is all undiluted horror. And in any moral sense, when the virtues and horrors are put on the scale, there is no question that the horrors weigh much, much, much more heavily. [O’Brien’s response to this question about a soldier’s attraction to combat came in an email to me dated July 8, 2000. I had written to him about a public lecture I was presenting, “Good Soldiers Fighting Unholy Wars: Siegfried Sassoon and Tim O’Brien.”]

H: Crazy question: What did you learn about love in Vietnam?

TO: Plenty. It’s not a crazy question; it’s a very important question. Love of virtue and how difficult it is to be virtuous. I learned to love acts of virtue. Because I realized in part how difficult they are to do, to be brave in a moral sense and in a physical sense. Love of peace. Peace, as I wrote in Cacciato, is a shy thing. It does not brag about itself. . . . Love of peace is something that war gave me. . . . Love of things that you take for granted in ordinary life, which one doesn’t acknowledge unless these things are not present. Clean air and the absence of noise. That is, no artillery around all the time. The sense that you can walk down the street without worrying about hitting a land mine. You learn to love sidewalks that aren’t booby-trapped. Love of family that you take for granted in ordinary life. They’ll always be there.
Well, they won’t always be there. Love of one’s own possibilities. A human being has a shining Silver Star [medal for bravery], each of us, inside of us. I wrote about it. You are not aware that the possibility is there until it is actualized by circumstance that requires its presence. There’s a passage where Paul Berlin is going to war and he looks at his own hands, “my hands; my hands.” Love of one’s limbs. Love their presence because in war there’s always the proximate danger of their absence. No hands. No legs. No feet. No testicles. No head. That passage in Cacciato was written with a real purpose in mind: “my hands.” Those are things that we take for granted. We don’t look at our hands and take a shower and say “my hands.” But war teaches you to value those hands.

H: What about love for fellow soldiers?
T: Cuts both ways, love for some and real hate for others. A real hatred for those who commit atrocities on a small scale—the “Mad Mark syndrome” [character in If I Die]: shooting at peasants, cutting off ears. Also, hatred for guys who fall asleep on guard. I mean real hatred, because they’re fucking with your life. Hatred for bullies. War is a place where bullies are allowed to really strut their stuff and really be bullies in a way they can’t on the streets of Cambridge. You can be a bully in Cambridge, or at Wabash, or in Minneapolis, but you can’t be a bully to the extent where you’re knocking people around with absolute impunity with the butt of an M-16 rifle. Or when you’re slicing up people under interrogation with a bayonet. You can’t be a bully that way; you’ll get arrested. In war you don’t get arrested. You get applauded, or at least your actions are implicitly sanctioned. So there’s a lot of hatred for my fellow soldiers. There is this incredible myth that fills the literature of war about fraternity and brotherhood. I say myth because it’s just not, in my experience, true. It’s much more of a mixture. There’s a lot of love, but there’s also a lot of real hatred that goes along with it. I didn’t love all my comrades. Some of them I despised. Many I was indifferent to.

H: What did you learn about individual courage and cowardice during your time in Vietnam?
T: Well, I learned the word [courage] itself is a multilayered concept and there are varieties of it. I don’t just mean moral courage versus physical courage; I mean varieties and layers of, say, moral courage. That it comes, like everything else, in degrees. I guess Vietnam made me less of an absolutist than I had been prior to going. I had been a kind of black-and-white guy: “It’s just bad and that’s it. Courage is courage and that’s it.” My experience made me more of a relativist in my approach to my own life and the world around me.
H: Speaking of courage, when you were visiting a class at Wabash College in November 1994, you reluctantly talked about receiving a Purple Heart for wounds you received two months after arriving in Vietnam and being awarded a Bronze Star (Valor) for rescuing a fellow soldier. Tell me more about this last event.

T: It was just a common thing; it was nothing. I think I told the class that it was nothing that wasn’t done every day by somebody. A guy was wounded, and I ran out and pulled him back. That’s all there was to it.

H: An unthinking act?

T: No, thinking. I was scared shitless, but also thinking, “The guy’s hurt.” Partly, I was calculating the odds. What are the odds that I’m going to get shot? It wasn’t a huge firefight. The odds of getting shot were not that great. I think that if it had been a full-scale sort of Okinawa battle, you know just grease [weapons fire] all over the place, I would have calculated my odds of being hit, and they would have been a lot more severe, maybe on the side of just waiting ten minutes. There was a slight calculation, but the odds seemed pretty slim that I was going to get hurt. It was over in twenty seconds.

H: Tell me a little bit more about your writing activities while you were in Vietnam.

T: Just little vignettes.

H: What was the reason for writing the vignettes?

T: I don’t know why, preferable to writing letters in some ways. A letter seems so personal that you cannot get the full truth out. Writing vignettes instead of letters, I could be more objective, a slight distance. My letters home tended to be full of self-pity and terror.

H: Did you eventually publish some of these vignettes?

T: I published a couple of them when I was in Vietnam; two pieces were in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, and one or two appeared in my hometown newspaper, the Worthington Daily Globe. All of these were rewritten for If I Die. And then I sent a piece into Playboy that was accepted after I got back from Vietnam and appeared July of 1970, called “Step Lightly,” about land mines [also rewritten for If I Die].

H: From your tour of duty, what are your lasting impressions of the Vietnamese people and the land?

T: A great and abiding mystery is the best I can say—great and abiding. To this day, abiding, partly because if you don’t speak the language, you know little about the culture, the history. You’re twenty-one years old; you’re thrown into this thing; you come home. You don’t have much opportunity, unless you’re a linguist, to speak to the Vietnamese, to learn anything about their
hopes and ambitions, on an individual or collective basis. A mystery in the way it’s not a mystery if you go to France or Germany. You may not know the language, but you know enough in terms of your reading and cultural history that you absorb things about the European world, our antecedents. A mystery—and it remains that way. How could [the Vietnamese] summon the fortitude and faith to persevere against, in the case of the American War, such long technological odds? This eighth-rate military power persevering under such a storm of technology and weaponry and to somehow persevere by pushing bicycles up hills and crawling into tunnels with a little sack of rice and five rounds of ammunition and a beaten-up, old AK. Yet they did. How they did it is a mystery to me.

H: Upon leaving Vietnam in March 1970, how were you a different person from the one who entered Vietnam thirteen months earlier?

To: Well, I mentioned one big way: I’m less of an absolutist about the world. It’s not as black and white as I used to think. I’m a much more cynical person than I was. It’s not that I didn’t think that politicians would lie; I knew they would and did. I just didn’t know the scope of it until the Vietnam experience—the breath-taking, stupefying, ballsy way in which deceit is carried out. I don’t like getting lied to. I never have. And I didn’t like it then, and I like it even less now. . . . Our country doesn’t like to admit errors. Who do you hear storming the White House now about no weapons of mass destruction? Either it was a lie, or it was incompetence. It was one of the two. . . . Either way, you ought to be outraged. We’re going off killing people and having our own sons die. But I don’t see much outrage about it. I just see George Bush getting elected again, and I don’t understand it. You can say, well, we got rid of a bad guy, but that’s not the reason we went to war. Colin Powell didn’t stand up in front of the United Nations and say, “Hey, join us to get rid of a bad guy.” It was a systematic case of terrifying the American public over weapons of mass destruction, nukes, and biological warfare in the aftermath of 9/11. We were terrorized into a war, and nobody seems to care much. They’re incompetents or lying, and I don’t understand it. I didn’t get outraged the way I am now, back then [before Vietnam]. The second time around outrage is there. And it’s not directed just at the politicians; it’s directed also at a nation of sheep willing to say, “Well, that’s okay. We went to war for one reason, but we changed reasons in the middle of the war. Let’s get rid of a bad guy as a new reason.” You don’t do that. . . . It’s a question of democracy, goodness, and value that, after having seen the corpses pile up, really gets to me. Sorry to go on like that, but that’s just one place where I really get tied up.
H: In *If I Die*, you mention that one of the things that emerged from your Vietnam experiences was the vow you made to yourself to return to the United States and crusade against the Vietnam War.

TO: That I’ve done, haven’t I? I haven’t kept many promises. That one I did keep.

H: But obviously yours is not a crusade against all wars. It was more a crusade against the Vietnam War.

TO: This war and wars that are analogous, which there are some. . . . My crusade is against an ignorant imposition of one nation’s will on the aspirations and desires of another nation. I guess I should say the legitimate aspirations and desires of another nation. That excludes, for example, Hitler’s aspirations and desires. I can’t say this is a true crusade, but a literary expression of disgust and anger about what can happen when a nation goes to war out of ignorance and inflated will.

H: From the late ’60s on, veterans’ protests were occurring in Washington, DC, including those coordinated by the Vietnam Veterans Against the War [VVAW] led by John Kerry and others. Did you consider joining that organization?

TO: I was in absolute sympathy, but I wasn’t a joiner, and in a way regret it. That is, I wish I had taken a stand then in a way that was political—gone to Washington and thrown my medals at the White House or at the Capitol steps, wherever they were demonstrating. On the other hand, I’m pretty sure I was doing the same thing through my writing. I took my writing seriously. At that point, I really did want to get a book out—*If I Die*—about the realities of the war. It seemed that a lot of the literature about Vietnam coming out at that time, which was 1972 and ’73, was of the patriotic grunt experience—sort of the “we did our best. Came home disillusioned, but disillusioned only because we couldn’t win the war.” I wanted to write a book about the infantryman’s experience through the eyes of a soldier who acknowledged the obvious: we were killing civilians more than we were killing the enemy. The war was aimless in the most basic ways, that is, aimless in the sense of nothing to aim at, no enemy to shoot, no target to kill. The enemy was among the people. Consequently, the weapons fire put out was put out in massive quantities against whole villages, whole populations. I wanted to write a book that got at that. So I felt that I was doing something.

H: In your fiction, you portray several characters suffering from PTSD related to their war experiences. David Todd and Billy McMann in *July, July* and John Wade in *In the Lake of the Woods* immediately come to mind. Did you experience PTSD symptoms upon your return?
TO: In the way they [Wade, Todd, McMann] did. Not a crippling, debilitating suffering where you have to check yourself into a VA hospital, but more a life-suffering, the kind you just witnessed, in a way. That little tirade I gave earlier about government lying—what you just heard was a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome resulting from witnessing the consequences of deceit, incompetence, and blundering. The consequences are your friends dying and your watching Vietnamese die and houses burned down. And it stays with you, and it affects you in ways that aren’t all terrible. They’re not all terrible. It’s good to have a little post-traumatic stress syndrome, so you won’t get stressed again, so you won’t get traumatized again. It’s like putting your hand in a fire. You do it enough times and you’re going to be careful of fire. So although there are negative things associated with post-traumatic stress syndrome, there are positives, too, that are very rarely written about. You learn to survive, and you learn what moral behavior is. And maybe you can do a little better yourself in summoning it. So in the ways that David Todd, Billy, and John Wade suffered, I suffer in some of those ways, too. Like John Wade, I don’t like talking about the past. I’d really prefer to bury it for my psychological well being. And yet as a writer, because I’ve chosen to write about it, I can’t. I’ve made a choice, and so I’ve got to stick with it. Like John Wade, I’m trapped in that I can’t forget it, nor could he.

H: Have you ever thought why you adjusted relatively well when other Vietnam veterans were and are having more serious psychological and behavioral problems?

TO: I think it is because I acknowledged from the beginning, even before going, that I was a coward, guilty. I have never changed this opinion of myself. I’ve been urged to, billions of times by billions of people at billions of readings: “Oh, you weren’t a coward. You did the right thing. You did what you had to do.” All of which is bullshit. None of which I believe about myself. To believe that about oneself is to forgive oneself for the unforgivable. Or to lie about oneself, or both. And I’ll be damned if I’m going to lie about myself. I did the wrong thing. I shouldn’t have taken part in the war, given what I believed. That is to say, others can do what they want to do, follow their own conscience. In my case, I committed an act of unpardonable cowardice and evil. I went to a war that I believed was wrong, and I actively participated in it. I pulled the trigger. I was there. And by being there I am guilty. And the issue then becomes what do you do afterward? To me, acknowledging the guilt helped me, from the start, helped me adjust, as opposed to kidding myself and finding out later.
H: After your return from Vietnam and a summer spent in Minneapolis, you enrolled in the Ph.D. program in government at Harvard and continued all the way through to finishing fifty pages of your dissertation (“Case Studies in American Military Interventions”). Along the way you read a lot of political philosophers. How did these graduate school experiences contribute to your writing career?

TO: They informed it in the same way the Macalester experience had, but in a deeper sense. I came to my studies at Harvard with Vietnam behind me. In the process of taking classes, I developed an interest in Aquinas and just causes for war and Marsilius of Padua, who wrote about issues of domestic tranquility being the chief virtue of a state. These issues took on a new significance at a higher pitch because of my war experiences and found their way into my writing in conspicuous ways. For example, the chapter in Cacciato is very important with the Paris Peace Table sequence with Sarkin Aung Wan. A lot of the philosophy comes from my study at Harvard, the writings of Michael Walzer, Aquinas, Marsilius, and Aristotle. The dialogue between Paul Berlin and Sarkin, whether to fight or to flee, is grounded in both my experience and in my subsequent readings.

H: While at Harvard you had two summer internships (1971 and 1972) and then a year-long leave of absence (1973–1974) working as a journalist for the Washington Post. Did these experiences help your development as a literary writer?

TO: Very much so. They taught me all kinds of great things, chief among them discipline, keeping my butt behind a typewriter ‘til the thing was done. Taught me important things about the composition of stories. Newspaper stories are called “stories” for a reason. What a lead is and what efficiency and economy in language are. When to use “that” as opposed to “which.” The use of active verbs. Stay away from “was,” “were,” “is,” “seems.” Taught me the value of pronouns. Make sure you pay attention to your pronouns. It was a great writing course, better than going to an MFA program. I kind of view it that way. In the final analysis my time at the Washington Post was my substitute for an MFA program.

H: Early in your writing career, you described a writing routine characterized by writing seven days a week for seven to eight hours a day. Has that routine changed over the years, especially now that you are a husband and father?

TO: I’m afraid it has. I kept it up until the birth of my first son, probably even more than seven hours a day. But once he came along, I’d say if I can get in
four hours, five, or something like that, I’m really lucky, and I’d say most often it’s three. . . . I try to write in the mornings, if I can. It doesn’t always work that way. But I keep the door open [writing office in the house], so when Timmy comes in, I play with him.

H: Do you find this starting and stopping difficult?

TO: Very difficult. For me as a writer, I have to be in the dream of it. And that used to mean going into the room and turning on the computer, or looking at the typewriter, and seeing where I was—entering the dream, and then staying in the dream of the story until I quit work. That for me was essential, and it’s hard now to keep the dream alive when I’m going in to change a diaper. But somehow I’m muddling through; it’s still working, knock on wood.

H: How do you begin a writing project? Do you outline the project?

TO: I don’t. Language comes to me almost always, a first sentence that’s interesting and worth pursuing. I don’t have any notion beyond that. I never have any notion beyond that, until I’m sixty, eighty, or a hundred pages into a book, when the thematic material begins to coalesce. At this point, the story is far enough along to where I know, generally, the direction it’s going—not where it’s going, just the direction: Cacciato, going away from a war. The Things They Carried was coalescing around issues of reality and truth.

H: Do you have a moral, thematic, or character center as a starting point for the language?

TO: No. It’s always linguistic: “It was a bad time” [Cacciato]. That line comes to you. Then almost instantly I think of A Tale of Two Cities. That sort of intrigues me: “It was the best of times. It was the worst of times.” “It was a bad time. Frenchie Tucker was dead.” It’s just a series of words leading to a page, a situation, a scene. “First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian College in New Jersey” [chapter—“The Things They Carried”]. The language comes to me. I don’t have any idea if the story is going to be about the things they carried or that the book is going to be about the things we carry. It starts with a bit of language, always, every time. And I follow the words. If the page is interesting, then I go on to the next page. And by the time I get sixty pages, the words have accumulated into a flow of story that includes plot, characters, and what I call an “aboutness.” This aboutness is memory and imagination in Cacciato, framed around a surreal, imagined, daydreamed journey to Paris. Or The Things They Carried is framed around the burdens we carry, not just in war, not just physically, but spiritually as well. The general aboutness includes issues of truth and what is truth and layers of truth.
All my books began with bits of language. I've learned over time not to do anything but trust the language, nothing but that. Not to force a theme into a book or to force a story into a book. Not to force characters into a book. Simply let the words carry me along as if the words are a river. If the river is strong enough and has a sense of direction to it, I will follow it.

H: I am intrigued by these comments about your sense of uncertainty and mystery as you begin a writing project. Many readers assume that authors have everything figured out related to their plots and characters before they begin a project and certainly by the time they finish the book. But you suggest that questions readers have, particularly about your characters, are questions that you as a writer have.

TO: I think if Melville knew what made Ahab tick, he wouldn’t have bothered to give us all of Moby-Dick. It leaves so much of the man’s soul unexplained, the same with any other major figure in literature. Hamlet’s question “to be or not to be” is a question of the soul, not just a question of die, don’t die; suicide, not suicide. It’s a question that goes to “Who am I? What do I want? What are my values?” That conflict goes on inside all of us. Characters that don’t work, I believe, are ones explained away by the author. They are cardboard figures. You know precisely what makes that character tick and that gives the character a melodramatic, stereotypical, cardboard feel. It’s one of, I think, the chief determinants of whether a character will survive as a character, or die the death of Simon Legree.

H: From your writer’s perspective, what else contributes to a good story?

TO: There’s a moral gravity and certainly moral choice where characters choose, make hard choices. Should I marry him or him? Should I walk away from this war, or not? The character pays a price for that choice and then has to make new ones. The stories I don’t much like are those in which things occur to a character. The character is not initiating that choice but is sort of responding to things as they come. There’s a frenetic cleverness to it all that doesn’t have gravity for me in the end because it’s just these things have happened [to the character]. Huck Finn chooses to get on the raft to go down the river, and Ahab chooses to chase the whale. Those stories appeal to me more. They have less of a happenstance feel to them, so I probably will always write that way.

H: Would you use the same criteria to describe what makes a good war story?

TO: I think the same principles apply. A bad war story is one in which things just happen to characters.

H: Are all good war stories antiwar?
TO: I never read a prowar story. Maybe there is one, but I have never read it. . .
I can’t imagine a book that would say, “Well, war is not so bad really.” It
would be written by a lunatic.

H: Should a writer consciously set out to write an antiwar book?

TO: I don’t think so. I don’t think consciously that would be your purpose.
Your purpose would be to have the characters just deciding something.
Even Donald Rumsfeld knows war is not fun and good, and he’d prefer not
to have it. (I think he does. I’m not sure of that, but I think so.) So I don’t
think even he, Nixon, or Bush, if they were novelists, would set out to write
a prowar or antiwar book. Catch-22 [Joseph Heller] is a good example. I’m
sure even Heller thought, “Well, you’ve got to stop Hitler.” Yet certainly,
you couldn’t call it a prowar book. Its final impact is this war is god-awful
and hideous. For all its humor and everything else, that’s the final impact
of it.

H: In various interviews, you have mentioned several prominent writers who
have influenced your own writing. Let me mention a few of these authors,
and you tell me something that, through their works, they have contributed
to your development as an author. First, Ernest Hemingway.

TO: Kind of a love/hate relationship. I love the lucidity and clarity of his sen-
tences, but I find him simplistic in his moral philosophy.

H: William Faulkner.

TO: I love the ambiguity, complexity, and mystery at the heart of his stories and
his characters, Joe Christmas, for example, or Quentin. Why did he jump
off that bridge, really? There is a beautiful ambiguity of character and theme
in his stories also reflected in the stories’ structure.

H: John Fowles.

TO: I love the moral significance of his themes. He goes after big game. I’m
thinking of Daniel Martin and The Magus, thinking of The French Lieutenant’s
Woman, thinking of one of the best stories ever written, The Ebony Tower.

H: Joseph Conrad.

TO: For me, one of the two or three greatest writers who ever lived. Despite the
awkwardness of a number of his sentences, there is a mixture of sublime
artistic integrity—simple, blunt, direct, clear storytelling that makes me
read and reread his works. You can look right up there [points to a shelf of
books] and see a shelf of Conrad. I still to this day reread him, probably once
a year.

H: Why?

TO: The density of his prose, which among most writers would be off-putting
to me. Conrad is like watching a photograph develop in paragraphs with
the accretion of details that goes on. It has a weight to it; that’s part of it. Also, there’s a corresponding moral gravity in his work, moral tension in his work. One could think of Lord Jim, for example, the tension: abandon ship, ship doesn’t sink. Jim spends the rest of his life partly running from this event and partly trying to atone for it. That moral tension you don’t often find in fiction, at least you don’t often enough. Too much fiction that I dislike suffers from an absence of moral gravity where there’s something both human and philosophical at stake. Lord Jim is an example where there’s a sense of self that’s been violated by that momentary lapse of courage, which influences the rest of a man’s life. . . . That appeals to me. [Among current writers] Cormac McCarthy has that quality; it’s not utterly abandoned. Other names come to mind, Robert Stone and some of John Irving’s work. I don’t mean to say [the moral gravity] is absent in all modern fiction, but I’m thinking of a wave of clever, humorous books by the David Sedarises and the Dave Eggerses of this world that are the new big sellers. I find them fun to read, but ultimately I feel like I’ve eaten Sun Chips.

H: You have noted on several occasions that ultimately you hope your writing will aid in understanding the “war of the living.” What exactly do you mean by this statement?

TO: We all, in our daily domestic lives, are at war as we live. We are at war with issues of conscience. We are at war with temptation. We are at war with the evils all around us. We are at war with our own despair—anyone who is going through a rocky marriage or lost a father. We tend to think of war as this foreign experience involving bombs, bullets, and aliens, when in fact, war doesn’t involve any of those three. It involves people right next to us in bed at night. The bombs can be words. The bullets can be misdeeds. We’re all at war, all of us, all the time. For me the use of Vietnam and war in general is a way of getting at what all of us face all of the time, every moment of life.

H: This idea reinforces your view that you cannot be categorized as a war writer because you write about issues and feelings that people encounter in their everyday lives.

TO: It’s like calling Toni Morrison a “black writer,” Shakespeare a “king writer,” Conrad an “ocean writer,” or Updike a “suburb writer.” Those are easy categorizations based on surface, and the issue is whether a story’s underpinnings and a story’s moral compass go beyond plot or not. The stories that don’t go beyond plot alone, war alone, to me aren’t art. Art goes beyond a kid on a raft going down a river. Art is what a kid on a raft going down a river encompasses.
H: Are your books about war and life political or apolitical?

TO: As a student of politics, to me everything is political in one way and not political in another. The characters in all my stories and novels are characters set in situations where the world at large impinges in a real way. In life, the outside world also suddenly asserts itself, requiring a response. I have a short story called “Loon Point” [in Esquire and a chapter in July, July], and on the surface it is not a political story at all. It is about a married woman who runs off and has an affair with a guy, and on page 2 the guy drowns. She is required to respond to his death, and she is worried about being found out by her husband. But she is also worried about not being found out. She is worried about having to live with the death being kept secret throughout her whole life. This little section also appears briefly in In the Lake of the Woods [character of Kathy Wade]. I stuck it in the novel. These are still political issues in a funny way, though, because politics has to do with the adjudication of competing values. For example, you need money for this or for that. And what do you value: budgetary discipline or feeding your kids? Adjudicating competing values is political. That’s what I call politics. “Loon Point” is a domestic story, removed from the global world impinging. Nonetheless, it is political in my opinion because it involves adjudicating values: on one hand, I wish I could be open about this. On the other hand, if I am open, I’m a known adulteress. On the other hand, I wish my husband cared enough to ask a question or two about what happened on my little journey.

H: Is the term “autobiographical fiction” ever an appropriate label for some of your writing?

TO: No, because it’s so transformed by imagination. It is inappropriate, I think. It’s appropriate only insofar as I’m a human being. I’ve lived a life, I was in Vietnam, I did not want to go. But so much of what I’ve written is made up. Or there’s a stem of truth, and then the rest of the story is invented. “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” [The Things They Carried] grows out of an anecdote that I heard while I was in Vietnam about a girl being in Vietnam. Well, I never saw her, but I heard it from enough places to sort of believe it. So that little stem of a story comes out of my autobiography: I heard this. But Mary Anne Bell and her seduction by the war, all that’s invented. And so to say it’s autobiographical is to be in error, worse yet, is to undermine art.

H: You said in our 1995 interview that “everything that I am doing flows out of the life I have led. And the life I have led is a life of finding it hard to distinguish within myself and without about what’s true and what’s not.” This
link between memory and imagination in your approach to writing also becomes a recurring theme in many of your books as characters use imagination as a heuristic process. Talk more about this memory-imagination link in your works, as well as in your life and in your creative process.

TO: That’s right. It works several ways. The memory-imagination link is used thematically in probably all my work, especially in The Things They Carried, in Cacciato, and in In the Lake of the Woods. But it also has to do with why I’m a novelist, why I write fiction. I generally believe that imagination, like daydreams and maybe like dreams themselves, is a way of modeling the world. For example, if one were in college and trying to decide, “what should I do with my life? what kind of career should I follow?” one ordinarily doesn’t sit down and say, “I’m going to be a doctor,” and then draw up a list of pros and cons... Human beings don’t just work on purely a rational basis. We work also in emotional ways. That is, we lead our lives partly based on reason, but also based on daydream and on emotion. If the imagined event doesn’t have a felicitous conclusion of some sort, the odds are—no matter how much reason would say you should be a doctor—the imagination, the imagined event, the imagined doctoring, will, if it’s unhappy, send you off to business school or send you off to consider another occupation. We tend, generally in our lives, to underestimate the power of imagination in determining how we behave, the people we marry, the phone calls we make, the decision to write a book or not... Often we will pursue what appears to be an irrational course in our life because imagination somehow will dominate...

H: Memory, then, provides the raw material, the data for the imagination to work with?

TO: I think that is exactly right. You can’t daydream in a vacuum without some sort of images to work with, or some condition of emotional memory, even if it’s just raw terror, eyes-closed raw terror. There has to be some condition of history for the imagination to play with, shape, rearrange.

H: A perfect example of this process at work would seem to be in In the Lake of the Woods where you used your own war experiences in the village of My Lai and in surrounding areas, along with the historical events of the My Lai Massacre, and then let your imagination shape your creative presentation of that event.

TO: As a writer that is exactly what I did. I researched [at the National Archives] what happened that day until I knew that village inside and out. I studied maps until I was blue in the face. In fact, when I visited My Lai [1994], I knew the place so well that a couple of the villagers, by my comments,
would say, “No, things didn’t happen here; it didn’t happen here. Were you here?” They knew that I was there. They showed me the site of the ditch massacre, and I knew it wasn’t right. They were showing me the right ditch, but the place the massacre had occurred was outside the village. I said, “It didn’t happen here. I know it didn’t happen here.” A villager asked me, “Were you here that day?” Most tourists would accept that that is the ditch. The villagers don’t want to take them out into the paddy where it really happened.

I used that raw material to write the My Lai chapters in *In the Lake of the Woods*, but rearranged a lot of it. That is to say, I changed some events. I had the American soldiers return to the village when in fact they didn’t. Also invented is the fly imagery. I gave dialogue to [Lieutenant William] Calley; I made it up for him. I put characters in the company who weren’t in the company, rearranged a couple of the actual incidents of atrocity, had things happen out of order. I did it knowingly and did it for novelistic purposes.

H: One of the issues emerging from this relationship between memory and imagination is the tension between fact and fiction, truth and lies, which you address with the terms “story truth” and “happening truth.” Talk more about these two forms of truth.

TO: You have to understand about life itself. There is a truth as we live it; there is a truth as we tell it. Those two are not compatible all the time. There are times when the story truth can be truer, I think, than a happening truth. This is an example I have used a thousand times, but it is familiar for readers to respond to. It has to do with a fish story. You go fishing and pull in a twenty-pound walleye—big, big, big walleye. Well, you go tell the story, and to make it feel for the reader as big as it felt when you reeled that fish in, you make it twenty-four pounds—a twenty-four pounder. In one sense it wasn’t a twenty-four-pound walleye. It’s a lie; it was a twenty-pound walleye. In another sense, the extra four pounds that you tacked on, while a lie, gives a little added heft that’s “true” to the feeling of bringing that fish in, and maybe when the story is told again the fish is a twenty-eight pounder. It really feels heavy. And in those ways, in our lives, we will make up things in order to get at the truth. That is, lies aren’t always told just to lie. Lies are sometimes told, and always told by fiction writers (good ones) to get at the truth. So I make up a character like Azar [The Things They Carried] or Stink Harris [Cacciato], and I make up an event, Curt Lemon playing catch with a smoke grenade before he is blown into the tree [The Things They Carried]. There was no smoke grenade. There was no Curt Lemon, in a way. There was a real guy who I used to model Curt Lemon after. But the thoughts that
I put into Curt Lemon’s mind I invented: “Was it the sunlight killing me? must have been Lemon’s final thought.” I invented that. It was imaginary. It never happened as far as I know, as far as anybody will ever know. Yet it is a way of getting at things that factual truth just can’t get at. The truth is, a friend of mine was blown into a bunch of bamboo. And I wasn’t even present [see “Ambush” in If I Die]. I was maybe a hundred yards away. And all I saw was the aftermath. I saw Chip’s body in the tree. But I didn’t see him step from the shade into sunlight. All of that is invented. The singing of “Lemon Tree” is invented, because, of course, the guy’s name wasn’t Lemon; it was Merricks. That is a way the invention gets at a kind of truth, the truth in that case is the way the macabre response, which will often link humor to tragedy, can diffuse horror or at least make it endurable.

H: What would you say is your chief asset as a writer?
T: Oddly enough, I’d say lyricism of a sort: passages of The Things They Carried, Cacciato, In the Lake of the Woods, July, July. That’s my strong suit: a kind of odd lyricism in the midst of a horror. I don’t mean lyricism in a Byronic sense; I mean it in my sense. That’s my strength; that’s, I think, when I’m writing best. The passages that are most often quoted from my works have a lyrical quality to them. It’s an odd word to use in the context of Vietnam.

H: Compare your writing to that of other American soldier-authors writing about the Vietnam experience, specifically Robert Olen Butler, Philip Caputo, and Larry Heinemann.
T: That’s a hard thing to discuss, but there’s a tonal difference among the four people you’ve chosen to do your book on. I think tone probably is a function of personal temperament in large part. Larry writes kind of the way he talks, and so do Phil and Butler. . . . I don’t know if you’ve ever talked with Michael Herr at all, but Dispatches sounds like Herr. There’s a voice coming at you from each of these people, and if there’s one thing that matters in good writing, that’s going to be it—the voice that’s coming to you. Conrad’s is grave and somber, serious. There are very few belly laughs in Joseph Conrad. I doubt if in life you’d be swapping dirty jokes with that guy; however, with Larry you couldn’t go ten minutes without a good loud laugh. In the midst of his bitterness, even, there’ll be a moment of laughter.

H: How does a young writer tap into that voice?
T: You pay attention to the way you talk. I don’t know how you teach it. It’s a reminder that I’ve given to myself and to my students, but mostly to myself, which is be Tim O’Brien. Don’t try to be Conrad, Shakespeare, Larry, or anybody. Try so far as you can to pay heed to your own voice. And by voice I don’t just mean language; I mean the values that are under the language,
which in my case are small-town values in some ways and in other ways the values of a guy who’s been to the war and seen the criminality and horror of it.

H: Do you think Vietnamese soldier-authors write about the American War differently than American soldier-authors write about the Vietnam War?

TO: Yes, I do. It’s a literary tradition that’s hard for an American to, at least for this American, fully appreciate, which is a kind of epic mythological distance. There’s a distance, and I mean a psychological distance from event and character. Especially in contemporary American fiction, you’re inside the head of a character in the way that there’s a strict point of view you adhere to. With the Vietnamese, the camera’s going all over the place. But there’s a distance to it, a formality that can be off-putting. I think one reason Bao Ninh’s [The Sorrow of War] work has, among probably all the Vietnamese writers, most succeeded here is that there’s less of it in his work than in most others. It’s, I guess, a question of literary and cultural tradition more than anything.

H: And is the Vietnamese writer’s extensive use of folklore part of the difference?

TO: Oh, a huge part of it. That’s what I meant by distancing. There’s a reliance on traditional structure, folklore, and history that contemporary American literature doesn’t have much to do with.

H: Did your return to Vietnam in 1994 alter in any way your perspective on the country and influence your subsequent writing?

TO: Not on an intellectual level, probably on a subconscious level. My impressions [prior to the trip] of Vietnam were the impressions of a twenty-two-year-old kid coming home scarred, full of bitterness and disgust and cynicism, and the returning softened some of that. It softened some of the ragged edges of it all. I don’t mean all of them, but some of them. The old memories live and will always live in that terrible time in my life, but alongside those horrible memories there are now some lovely, utterly different memories of the same pieces of ground. There’s a paddy that was bubbling with machine gun fire and will always bubble, but now it’s the same paddy that’s at peace and a little boy on a water buffalo waving at me. You could multiply that by many other examples, so that’s why softened isn’t the right word. The past will always loom for me, as it does for all of us. You remember your hometown and your dad, and they remain, those images, but there are new ones you accumulate through life that then live side by side.

H: Why is the American public still so fascinated with literature emerging from the Vietnam experience?
TO: I’m not sure they are, number one. When I look at the books from Vietnam that have survived the scars of syllabi, reviews, and time (the few books that sort of managed to keep bobbing on the surface of consciousness), there aren’t many. For every one that survived, maybe thirty or fifty utterly vanished. I don’t think those that have lasted have survived wholly for cultural or war reasons. I think the ones that have survived have survived for artistic reasons. . . . I think that *Dispatches* probably has survived because of its incredible prose. We’ve all known about Khe Sanh. We’ve all read a million things about it, but there’s something about Herr’s Khe Sanh that’s alive and with us. It’s still happening in a way that comes from the sentences that Michael wrote. Look at Larry’s new book [Heinemann’s *Black Virgin Mountain*], and I think that’s what’s going to survive for its relentless, unforgiving bitterness, yet an earned outrage softened in the end by the conclusion to the book. He doesn’t say no more outrage and no more bitterness; that’s going to be there forever. But there’s something else that comes from that mountain at the end.

H: A feeling of being at home?

TO: Yes, that “home-ness”; [the book is] art and it’s not ’Nam. The book isn’t about ’Nam per se; it’s really about outrage per se and hurt, and finally a kind of salvation that could apply to WWI, the Civil War, Hastings, or Thermopylae. So I’m not sure that Vietnam matters much to people when it comes to those books. I think it’s the book that matters more than anything else.

H: How has twice becoming a father later in your life changed your perspective on life and your writing?

TO: It’s given me good material to write about. As you know, and probably every parent learns, you have an incredible fear for the well-being and safety of your child. You imagine terrible things happening that you hope to prevent. It could be anything: getting hit by a car, falling and breaking a leg, or getting kidnapped. I’m using this fear as material for my new book. In my other books, characters had been concerned largely for their own well-being, moral and physical; it’s now shifted a little bit. The well-being of another is prompting a character in the book I’m writing now to take drastic steps in his life, and that’s a plot thing in part, but it’s also, it seems, a slight moral shift.

H: You have also experienced another major change in your career—your current teaching position at Texas State University as a writer in residence. What are the joys and frustrations of working with students in a creative writing program?
TO: Teaching is harder than I imagined. Reading bad prose is my idea of hell. That’s one thing for sure, and it’s tough. I’m a guy who can’t let an indefinite article pass by, every little detail. So you get these big novels to read, and they’re full of mistakes of all kinds. It’s overwhelming. I find myself teaching grammar a lot of the time, sentence structure, not to mention all of the big stuff that I have to teach along with that: form, structure, and characterization. A lot of it is teaching sentence-making. It’s hard enough to make my own sentences decent. A lot of the stuff is hard to articulate: this thing I was mentioning earlier about how hard it is to articulate the why-ness of choices. Why is it [manuscript] then too slow? Why is it melodramatic? Why is it boring? Why is it unconvincing? You can say it’s unconvincing, but to explain why is not easy because for each little thing you may say, there’s a counterargument to it that you also have to address. So it’s a joy when you get through to the student, not to convince the student but to articulate [the problems]. For example, I might feel I have articulated as best I can why it’s melodramatic. The frustration is having to do this in the first place. “It’s so transparently obvious; you’ve got a guy tying a woman to a railroad track twirling his mustache with a train coming. You haven’t seen that in an old 1920s movie?” That’s an exaggerated example, but not that much exaggerated. So the frustration and the joy are sort of the same thing. The joy is when you feel like, “oh yeah, now he or she has gotten what I meant” and let them go away and do what they have to do. Teaching is a frustrating thing to do, because most of what you [a writer] do in your head, you don’t articulate to yourself. You’ve just got to know that scene’s not working. 

H: Which is your whole point in The Things They Carried about what makes a good war story: it’s in the gut; it’s not in the head. So it’s very difficult to articulate what’s in the gut.

TO: Yes, that’s true. That’s a really good example. I don’t need to say any more because I think you’re right.

H: I want to end our conversation by discussing three of your books in more detail—your first book and two of your more recent books: If I Die in a Combat Zone (1973), The Things They Carried (1990), and July, July (2002). How do these works reflect this relationship between memory and imagination/story truth and happening truth that you talk about so frequently?

TO: So many similarities. . . . The past is always with us; it’s part of our “now-ness.” We tend to think of history as “then-ness”: then I was young, then I was in love, then I was in ’Nam. But those things are part of our now-ness. They form the way we speak, what we speak about, what we care about,
what we bring to our graves with us; and the three books you mentioned, they seem exactly the same.

H: In *If I Die*, however, which is memoir, you’re drawing more closely on your own memory, and in the other two you’re moving away from that memory and letting the imagination take over.

T: You’re right in terms of absolute time proximity. *If I Die* is closer to it, and even a couple of chapters were written in Vietnam, or partially written there. But the book as a whole was written from six months to two years after the fact. So even then, there’s a slight gap. And what one also has to bear in mind about *If I Die* is that the book is scrambled in terms of chronology; it’s not in chronological order. It’s also selective, a very short book about a year and a half of my life, counting basic training. So much is left out. It’s selective in a way that fiction is, where you leave out a lot. Much is omitted, and that’s true of what a memoir is, in essence. Even a memoir is necessarily selective.

H: So even in memoir, imagination comes into play?

T: Oh, of course it does. It comes into structuring things and selecting what goes in. Who remembers, for example, the exact dialogue that occurred five minutes ago, much less a month ago, or a year ago, or eight years ago? But from five minutes ago, I couldn’t repeat any of the sentences I just said, but you pretend to do it. In *If I Die*, I had quotation marks indicating Captain Johansson said “blah, blah, blah, blah.” The idea is to replicate as best you can the feel, the intent, the meaning of what was said, what was witnessed [story truth]. But to pretend that it’s an absolute faithful rendering of a prior event [happening truth] is its own fiction. That’s why this dichotomy between fact and fiction is always intriguing, because it seems to be meaningless in the end. . . . They’re both part and parcel of the human effort to explain the world to others and to ourselves. The differences are there [fact and fiction], but they seem so modest in comparison to the intent of a good memoir or a good novel, which is to render as well as you can the truth of something, the best you know it.

H: Are these three works representative of the overarching content and style of your writing? Specifically, all three, in interesting ways, appear to examine the dominant theme in your writing—“the things we do for love.” Is that an accurate assessment?

T: Very accurate. It goes back to my childhood, I’m sure, and my dad, and ’Nam, but primarily to childhood. It’s of personal interest to me, but it’s become more of a thematic interest the older I get and the more I write. At first, it was associated purely with Vietnam, but now it’s associated with life in
general—the things we will do for love. And I don’t think it’s uncommon. I think it’s one of the fundamental binding elements in human nature that we share to one degree or another. To a greater or lesser degree, we make our choices partly based on the desire to be loved, not only by others, but by ourselves as well. There’s a tension between those two because sometimes they’re in opposition. . . . There’s a perverted side to it that interests me as much as an affirmative wonderful side to it, the good things we’ll do for love: protect our kids and make great sacrifices for noble, good things. And it’s that tension between the terrible things we will do in the name of so-called love and the wonderful things—how you adjudicate that in life. If I were to say there is a central theme in my work, I would say that’s it. I’ve said this before: I view all of my stories and novels as about that fundamental question. Courage comes up and all this other stuff, but the other themes serve this central theme, which has to do with loving: finding a love for oneself and others and behaving honorably in that service. It’s so easy in life to compromise and forget, erase the values you truly find important for self-love and the love of other people, and not just in political ways, in small, personal ways as well. That I think is my theme as a writer, and it’s not just an afterthought. I began writing out of this hatred for myself, as a coward for going to Vietnam and not saying no. And the whole thing with my dad and winning his love is embedded in my life. So it’s not an afterthought that I’m putting on top of my work. It’s where I began as a writer, and it’s something I have of necessity been faithful to. I can’t write about anything else. It’s not an intentional faithfulness; it’s the only subject that really interests me.

H: Another recurring pattern in these three books involves characters choosing to confront or to avoid complicated situations—to flee or to fight, so to speak. Is such a choice important because, as one character says in July, July regarding choices in life, “what we choose is what we are”?

TO: They do, they really do. It’s that old John Mitchell thing where he said during Watergate, “Don’t judge us by what we say; judge us by what we do.” And we did. We did judge him by what he did. He went to jail, based not on what he said: “Let’s have a systematic program of break-ins and eavesdropping and using the power of the presidency to get back at newspapers through the FCC.” We judged him by what he did, not by whimsical thought, and that’s what that quote refers to. That quote from July, July isn’t in a political context, but in life itself. It’s what the Hindus would call karma, our behaviors in the world.

H: All three works also have a similar structure—the series of vignettes carefully linked together. Does the structure have something to do with your
notion that “the angle shapes reality” and your narrative technique of exploring similar incidents from different perspectives?

TO: It’s the only way I know how to tell a story, and as writers we all have our, I want to say, preferences, but I mean it in a stronger way than that—our gifts or how we go about getting at material. I can only do it through sets of fairly short stories because life comes at me that way. It doesn’t come at me in a whole. It comes at me, and then there’s an interlude of forgetfulness, and then the next thing happens. What I’m left with as a human being are chunks of memory, and I tend to write all my books that way. I think John Irving has a sense of the wholeness of things. When he writes a book, he begins with an epilogue, and he has a whole sense of the arc of the story. But my life isn’t that way; hence, I can’t write that way. I think most of us are that way, too. All that you’ll remember thirty years later if you were in college are a few images and events, and even those events you won’t remember much of. Our lives have a way of boiling themselves down to chunks of just really discrete memories that we call a life. And I think what’s memorable to us are those chunks in which we’ve made moral choices and have gone through hard struggles and somehow seen our way through, maybe not happily and maybe not even successfully.

H: And for each of us, those memorable chunks often emerge from who we are and what has driven us: the quest for love, the choices that we’ve made.

TO: That’s right. The reason you will remember those chunks is they have to do with that underlying craving you may have for this or for that.

H: And is that what links all your books—those underlying cravings?

TO: As different as Tomcat and July, July are in comparison to my so-called Vietnam books, they’re not that different to me. They’re just a domestic side of another kind of war for me.

H: Interesting, I was going to say I see July, July as the domestic version of The Things They Carried in which you explore the “war of the living.”

TO: It is in many respects. It’s a book that, you know, got horrible reviews. But it’s a book that, I think, has incredible merit and which I am proud of. That’s not true of all of my books, but it’s true of that book. I didn’t really read many of the reviews and was told about a couple of them. But it’s a book that I can pick up, unlike some of my other books, and say, “Wow, I really like it.” It addresses the issues I care about, and the stories I find interesting. Maybe, some day, I’ll read the reviews and see what they didn’t like, but I’m not going to do it until I’m like ninety years old.

H: Together, do these three books (first, middle, and latest) represent an evolution in your writing?
TO: I don’t think they’re an evolution. I think it’s just a path of repetition. As different as the books are, their central concern remains the same: this battle for I call it love, though it involves self-respect, moral integrity, the difficulty of doing the right thing. Only it’s in different contexts. It’s like Conrad. One of his stories is aboard a ship; the next is in South America; and the next is in darkest Africa. On the surface, they may seem different, but the moral about-ness of the books is the same. His stories are largely about, not entirely, but largely about fear causing a blunder that must be overcome somehow. Lord Jim is a conspicuous example, but it’s certainly true in *Heart of Darkness*. The wail at the end ([*Heart of Darkness*], “The horror! The horror!”) is not just about brutalities witnessed. That cry [Kurtz’s] is about himself, I think. “What have I done; what have I become?” Lord Jim could make the same cry, and Nostromo could make the same cry.

H: Could you make the same cry?

TO: Well, mine’s somewhat different. Mine’s not what have I done, but how hard it is to salvage something from the waste. . . . I just sort of know I made mistakes in my life, with ‘Nam being paramount on the list, but others as well. It’s a question of how do I make something better out of it, and that’s what these characters in all of my books are trying to do. John Wade ([*In the Lake of the Woods*]) tried to make a life after My Lai through lies and deceit, but he’s still made a life that has come crumbling down on him. How do you go forward having been discovered that way, to salvage something from it? How did he find himself again and love himself again? I don’t know.

H: You used the term “repetition” earlier referring to reoccurring themes in your works. In so many of your works you repeatedly explore similar events or choices from different perspectives, suggesting that, as stated in [*In the Lake of the Woods*], “the angle creates reality.”

TO: It’s what I’ve tried to articulate now: I don’t think the three books are an evolution. Each is a different angle on a central human concern that partly comes out of my autobiography, partly intellectual, partly just the fabric of the world as I know it. And I see it [the concern] through other people’s experiences.

H: The things we do for love?

TO: And all the angles on it. It’s a human thing. It’s worth the exploration of a novel or a short story.

H: Despite, at times, the bleakness of the vignettes in all three of these books, what’s the hope emerging in these works?
“Maybe so.” Those words are at the end of Cacciato where maybe Cacciato did make it to Paris. It’s not an absolutism; it’s a maybe so. It’s what Faulkner, I think, was talking about—we can prevail. I don’t think he meant it in an absolutist way. I think that he just meant the human spirit will keep trying, that kind of prevailing, not success. But we will prevail in that we’ll just keep trying to walk away from wars and to better our relationships with other human beings and with ourselves. It’s that kind of hope. . . . Humans somehow find a way to recognize their mistakes and plunge ahead, knowing they’ll probably make more. But there’s a kind of hope that prevents us from doing ourselves in: that thing we began talking about earlier, that little core of “me-ness” or “you-ness” that you find inside you and you hang onto it for dear life and hope it will suffice.

H: And hope also comes from the fact that we have the free will to make choices?

T: Yeah, it’s that quote in If I Die [epigraph], from Dante, “the greatest gift of God is freedom of will.”

H: Shifting our focus back to one of the books, how do you explain the immense popularity of The Things They Carried among readers of all ages, genders, and backgrounds?

T: Utterly shocking. I really don’t know the answer to that. I think it’s a hard book in some ways. Students find it frustrating and angering, “Oh, you’re lying to me.” And to convince them that I wasn’t lying on purpose or for its own sake is hard. I spend half my time on college visits trying to justify what I did using myriad examples and some life events, but ultimately not succeeding. Maybe that’s the reason [for the book’s success]; it engenders frustration. But that’s not the whole of it because I’ll get letters from people and in conversations with kids, they’ll say, “It’s the only book I’ve ever read.” So there’s something happening in it that goes beyond the frustration.

H: Does this novel reach people at that gut level, that emotional level—“makes the stomach believe”?

T: I think it is; something’s happening. Catcher in the Rye falls into that category of books that get to people of all age levels. It gets to good writers; it gets to old people. But to put your finger on it, you can’t. It’s like Jell-O. In terms of books, I don’t think [The Things They Carried] is my best book. I think that Cacciato, In the Lake of the Woods, and July, July are probably my best books. I don’t mean to denigrate The Things They Carried. I like the book in all kinds of ways, but I don’t think it’s, by my standards, my best. It’s in the top four.
H: Within the context of this interview, can knowing details about you as a person help readers in any way appreciate your writing more?

TO: I think really, not. I don’t know what Larry, Phil, and Bob have said or other writers say, but I really don’t think so. I know in my heart, in my head, and in all other ways that when I go into that [writing office], sit down, look at the page, and start typing sentences, I’m not the guy you’re talking to now. My history is irrelevant. What’s to know is what appears on the page, and even I don’t know that until it’s written.

H: Does an interview like this one introduce readers to incidents and concerns from your own life that are transferred and transformed in your writing?

TO: Sort of, but only to a point. You think of Conrad (we started there and I’m obsessed by him now); you could know all the facts of his life and read his letters, and you still wouldn’t have *Heart of Darkness*, *Victory*, or *Lord Jim*. They’re so imagined. I think there’s an intent when you try to create art to not be yourself, but to be maybe your best self, or the self you almost were, or the opposite of yourself. There’s an “un-selfness” where you intentionally are breaking the cord. You start with your own concerns, but then you move into a story that’s not what you would do or have done. Instead, it becomes this otherness thing. It’s this other life you’re following that’s related to yours, and you care about it deeply because it started with you. I’ve had many debates about this with people, and I know I’ve not utterly convinced everybody. But that’s how I feel about it.

H: In an interview, Philip Caputo says, “One thing that tends to drive people to become writers or to need to be writers—Hemingway talks about this—is some sort of wound. Really happy, well-adjusted people don’t become writers. At least they don’t become what we think of as literary writers.” How do you respond to Phil’s observation in terms of your own writing career?

TO: I’d say I think he’s right.

H: What’s the wound in your own life?

TO: Well, everything we’ve talked about throughout the course of the interview: ‘Nam, family life, Worthington, America—all falling ultimately into that main river of the love issue, people loving themselves and people wanting to be loved and trying to adjudicate the tension between those two things.

H: How might you respond to students in your MFA class who say they don’t have a wound to drive them?

TO: I don’t believe them if they say that to me. You wouldn’t be a human being if you hadn’t been wounded. They don’t think with simplicity about it. They think it almost has to be a big climbing-a-mountain or going-to-war kind
of thing. Your parents get divorced, or your dog dies, or a friend betrays you. Millions of things happen in our lives. I think a writer is one who is so moved by [these things] and disturbed that it’s like a scab that you start picking. And you pick at it with this novel, and you pick at it with that novel. What I’d say to a student is that you’ve just got to pick at the scab, not be afraid of it. Probably that means acknowledging it, but it partly means just the courage to expose your own vulnerabilities.

H: Do you ever get a sense, and maybe this happens with the reviews of July, July, that critics, as well as some readers, don’t want you to succeed at anything other than picking at your Vietnam scab?

TO: Part of me does think that at times. But I think it’s more expectation than not wanting. . . . What if Shakespeare did a slapstick pornography thing with lots of onstage fucking? It’d be so jarring based on one’s expectations coming from Hamlet or even Taming of the Shrew. But in the hands of say Henry Miller or a Mailer (exactly the same words), the response may be, “There’s a good piece of Henry Miller.” I really think it’s more expectation than anything, and the thing about a career, thank God, is I’m still relatively young. I’ve got twenty, thirty years ahead of me.

H: Larry Heinemann in talking about his war experiences noted that they made him a writer; without them he probably would be driving a bus. Phil Caputo noted that without the war experiences he would be a full-time journalist with maybe a couple of books under his belt. Did the war make you a writer?

TO: I can’t say that. It didn’t make me that. I think if my father had not been my father, I wouldn’t have been a writer. I would have found some other way to salvage something from the wreckage. If it hadn’t been for the county library and my mom being a schoolteacher. If it hadn’t been that I was hooked on books from the time I was five. Vietnam was a big part of it, but without those other elements, I doubt that I would have become a writer. As I mentioned earlier in the interview, I’d dreamed of [becoming a writer] from a time when I was very young. That desire to write just collided with Vietnam. So it took all these tributaries to make me sit down one day and begin Going After Cacciato, my first serious book. With If I Die, I wasn’t a writer then. I was a graduate student who wanted to get Vietnam written about. And I don’t mean to denigrate the book. It’s honest, straightforward, and more or less accurate. There are things I like about it, but it’s not a literary book. It wasn’t the work of a conscious writer. When I started Cacciato, I was starting an effort to be a literary writer. By that I mean trying to write nice sentences, the tone of which would carry freight, not just the content of the words but the plot and whatnot, and
becoming conscious of structure and what structure does to a story: how it matters and makes the story better, richer, and more memorable. Vietnam didn’t cause any of that literary stuff to happen. That was caused by reading Alice in Wonderland; that was caused by reading Hemingway, Faulkner, Dos Passos, and the modernists.

H: Do you still have your military dress uniform with battle ribbons on it?
TO: Yes, it’s in my closet.

H: What does the uniform represent for you?
TO: It’s an artifact of history in the same way that, say you robbed a bank and went to jail, you’d want artifacts of your own mistakes around—a newspaper clipping or something from your jail cell to remind you of the person you were and don’t do it again. Say you broke your leg in a sandbox when you were a kid. You wouldn’t love the sandbox, but if you went back and revisited it, you’d look at that sandbox and it’d be part of your history and you’d be grateful to have seen it again. It’s that kind of feeling. I wish I had more artifacts from that time. Most of them I lost along the way or maybe in anger disposed of. I’ve got maybe four photographs or five from that time. At one time after I came home, I must have had a hundred of them, either given to me or I’d taken. During a really bad time of my life I remember getting rid of a lot of that stuff, throwing it in the wastebasket, dumping it out, and being very proud of myself and angry. Now, I regret it. I do wish I had more artifacts, reminders.

H: Is there also a sense of a pride in endurance represented by the uniform and ribbons?
TO: No, pride isn’t the word. I wish I could say yes because most veterans would really disagree with me. They’d say “you idiot” and “you asshole,” but pride is not the operative word. It’s a thing I’ve gone through, a bad thing. It’s akin to having had cancer. Pride’s not the word you come up with, at least not the first word anyhow. What the word is, I don’t know, but it’s just my “me-ness.”

WORKS BY & INTERVIEWS WITH TIM O’BRIEN