



Philip Caputo (1941–)

Philip Caputo first entered Vietnam in March 1965, when the first U.S. Marine combat forces landed in that war-torn country. When he began his tour of duty in Vietnam, Caputo was confident that the mighty U.S. forces would smash the Communist threat to South Vietnam within a matter of months. But the American march to victory floundered in the steamy jungles and rugged mountains of Vietnam. For U.S. soldiers, the war turned into a terrifying, frustrating, and deadly contest for survival in a strange land. During this period, Caputo admitted that his "convictions about the war . . . eroded to almost nothing."

Caputo spent some of his time in Vietnam tracking U.S. and enemy

casualties. He hated this duty, however, and actually volunteered for a combat assignment in order to escape it. As a result, Caputo spent his last months in Vietnam as an infantry officer leading Marines on combat patrol in the South Vietnamese countryside. Near the end of this assignment, he ordered several of his men to kidnap two suspected Viet Cong guerrillas from a remote village. The soldiers then killed the two men, as Caputo had hoped they would.

Caputo initially viewed the kidnapping mission as a success, but he later learned that both of the men had been South Vietnamese youths seeking protection from Viet Cong military recruiters. This realization horrified

Things to remember while reading the excerpt from *A Rumor of War*:

- When American combat troops first arrived in Vietnam, they expressed great confidence in their ability to quickly defeat the Viet Cong and their North Vietnamese allies. As the months passed, however, U.S. soldiers began to recognize that the war would be a long and bloody affair. This realization had a negative impact on the morale of many soldiers.
- Vietnam was not the first war in which acts of savagery took place. Military historians agree that acts of ruthlessness and cruelty are an unfortunate characteristic of all wars, whatever their time and place.

Caputo and deepened his anguish about the war. The U.S. military called for an investigation into the incident. Caputo was only punished with a letter of reprimand, but years later he expressed shame and regret about his part in what he called the "murder" of two innocents.

After ending his tour of duty in Vietnam, Caputo left the Marine Corps and became a journalist. In 1975 he returned to South Vietnam to cover the fall of Saigon to Communist forces. Two years later, he published *A Rumor of War*, a dark and honest account of his experiences in Vietnam. This memoir quickly became known as one of the finest books ever

written about the war. Since *A Rumor of War* was published, Caputo has become a successful novelist.

Caputo has made two other trips to Vietnam since the war ended in 1975. In 1990 he traveled there with a group of American writers who had served in the conflict to meet with several Vietnamese novelists and poets who had fought with the North Vietnamese Army. And in 1999 he returned to Vietnam to revisit the trails and villages where he and his comrades had fought and died. Months later Caputo described the visit as one that helped him heal old spiritual wounds associated with the war.

- The average age of U.S. soldiers who served in Vietnam was only 19. By contrast, the average age of an American soldier in World War II was 26. Most U.S. combat soldiers who fought and died in the jungles of Vietnam, then, had attended high school proms and graduation parties only a few months earlier. Many observers believe that the young ages of American troops contributed to the savagery that prevailed among some combat units in Vietnam. They believe that the inexperience and youth of the soldiers made them more likely to resort to excessive violence and cruelty as a way of warding off the fear and helplessness that they felt.
- Despite the vicious nature of the war in Vietnam, many American veterans express pride in their service. As Myra

MacPherson observed in *Long Time Passing: Vietnam and the Haunted Generation*, "even those who found the war a tragic, shattering waste and wore peace symbols on their helmets know a sense of honor in doing their own job well, in helping others to live, in having survived."



Excerpt from Philip Caputo's memoir A Rumor of War

In late October an enemy battalion attacked one of our helicopter bases, inflicted fifty casualties on the company guarding it, and destroyed or damaged over forty aircraft. Two nights later, another Viet Cong battalion overran an outpost manned by eighty marines from A Company, killing twenty-two and wounding fifty more. The usual ambushes and booby traps claimed daily victims, and the medevac helicopters flew back and forth across the low, dripping skies.

The regiment's mood began to match the weather. We were a long way from the despair that afflicted American soldiers in the closing years of the war, but we had also traveled some emotional distance from the cheery confidence of eight months before. The mood was sardonic, fatalistic, and melancholy. I could hear it in our black jokes "Hey, Bill, you're going on patrol today. If you get your legs blown off can I have your boots?" I could hear it in the songs we sang. . . . One, "A Bellyful of War," was a marching song composed by an officer in A Company.

Oh they taught me how to kill,
Then they stuck me on this hill,
I don't like it anymore.
For all the monsoon rains
Have scrambled up my brains,
I've had a belly-full of war.

Oh the sun is much too hot,
And I've caught jungle rot,
I don't like it anymore.
I'm tired and terrified,

Viet Cong: North Vietnamese guerrilla fighters.

A Company: A military division.

Medevac: Medical evacuation.

Regiment: Military unit of ground troops.

Afflicted: Suffering from pain, or distress.

Sardonic: Scornful.

Fatalistic: Feeling of having no control over one's future.

Melancholy: Sad or depressed.

Black jokes: Angry or cruel humor.

Monsoon: Weather season marked by heavy rain and winds.

Jungle rot: Skin infection common among soldiers in Vietnam.

and
in a
their
job

deli-
it,
ter,
hty
ifty
ms,
ow,

e a
los-
dis-
ood
ack
egs
ng.
an



*I just want to stay alive,
I've had a belly-full of war.*

*So you can march upon Hanoi,
Just forget this little boy,
I don't like it anymore.
For as I lie here with a pout,
My intestines hanging out,
I've had a belly-full of war.*

There was another side to the war, about which no songs were sung, no jokes made. The fighting had not only become more intense, but more vicious. Both we and the Viet Cong began to make a habit of atrocities. One of 1st Battalion's radio operators was captured by an enemy patrol, tied up, beaten with clubs, then executed. His body was found floating in the Song Tuy Loan three days after his capture, with the ropes still around his hands and feet and a bullet hole in the back of his head. Four other marines from another regiment were captured and later discovered in a common grave, also tied up and with

GIs carrying a fellow soldier who has been wounded out of the jungle during the war.

Reproduced by permission of AP/Wide World Photos.

Hanoi: Capital of North Vietnam.

Song Tuy Loan: River in South Vietnam.

VC: Viet Cong.

Annihilated: Destroyed completely.

Systematic: Carrying out a step-by-step plan; methodical.

Feigning: Pretending.

Line companies: Troops operating in areas closest to the enemy.

Corroded: Dissolved or worn away.

Wracked: Twisted or beaten.

Bluing: A protective substance used on rifles.

Mincing distinctions: Elegant or refined rules.

Humanize: Make human.

their skulls blasted open by an executioner's bullets. . . . A twenty-eight man patrol was ambushed by two hundred VC and almost **annihilated**. Only two marines, both seriously wounded, lived through it. There might have been more survivors had the Viet Cong not made a **systematic** massacre of the wounded. After springing the ambush, they went down the line of fallen marines, pumping bullets into any body that showed signs of life. . . . The two men who survived did so by crawling under the bodies of their dead comrades and **feigning** death.

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

Everything rotted and corroded quickly over there: bodies, boot leather, canvas, metal, morals. Scorched by the sun, **wracked** by the wind and rain of the monsoon, fighting in alien swamps and jungles, our humanity rubbed off of us as the protective **bluing** rubbed off the barrels of our rifles. We were fighting in the cruelest kind of conflict, a people's war. It was no orderly campaign, as in Europe [during World War II], but a war for survival waged in a wilderness without rules or laws; a war in which each soldier fought for his own life and the lives of the men beside him, not caring who he killed in that personal cause or how many or in what manner and feeling only contempt for those who sought to impose on his savage struggle the **mincing distinctions** of civilized warfare—that code of battlefield ethics that attempted to **humanize** an essentially inhuman war. . . . Butchery was butchery, so who was to speak of rules and ethics in a war that had none?

[After enduring a period as an officer in charge of counting American and Communist casualties, Caputo volunteers to join a combat unit. He accounts for this change by listing boredom, emotional exhaustion associated with identifying bodies, and a furious desire to avenge the deaths of friends who had died. In December 1965 his platoon is assigned to clear Viet Cong guerrillas out of a village. During the mission, Caputo's unit endures vicious firefights, deadly sniper fire, long marches through a region called Purple Heart Trail because of its minefields, and nights of monsoon rains. They then are hit by a mortar attack that may have been accidentally launched by friendly forces.]

tir
ing
Th
fre
me
wi
dk
ag
M.
ar.

fir

we

as
m

th.
th.
nc
st
It
hc
ing
..
we
ch
nc
ch

or
op
of

The shells seemed to take forever to fall. For what seemed a long time, we heard the **lunatic chorus wailing** in the sky, our bodies bracing for the coming shock, hearts **constricted**, all thoughts suspended. Then the storm struck. The shells, impacting about twenty-five yards from the **perimeter**, exploded one after another, creating one enormous blast that went on for five minutes. **Shrapnel** flew overhead with a sound like that of taut steel wires snapping. Jones and I, huddled beside each other like two frightened children, pressed ourselves against the earth. I wanted God to shut that roaring out of my ears. Make it stop. Please God, make it stop. . . . [The shelling finally ends, and Caputo climbs out of his foxhole to check on his men.]

I crawled out to the edge of the perimeter and called to Smith's **fire-team**.

"Yes, sir," Smith said in a whisper.

"You guys all right?"

"Outside of being cold, wet, miserable, hungry, and scared . . . we're just fine, sir."

"No casualties?"

"No, sir. Because I'm black, the shells couldn't see me."

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

[Caputo learns that a Christmas cease-fire has been called, and that his platoon has been ordered to return to their base. Delighted, the unit begins marching out of the jungle. As they pass a small Vietnamese village, a landmine blows up in their midst.] Still slightly stunned, I had only a vague idea of what had happened. A mine, yes. It must have been an **ambush-detonated** mine. All of Pryor's squad had passed by that spot before the mine exploded. I had been standing on that very spot, near the tree, not ten seconds before the blast. . . . Oh God—if I had remained on that spot another ten seconds, they would have been picking pieces of me out of the trees. Chance. Pure chance. Allen, right beside me, had been wounded in the head. I had not been hurt. Chance. The one true god of modern war is blind chance. . . .

A rifleman and I picked up Sergeant Wehr, each of us taking one of the big man's arms. . . . A **corpsman** cut Wehr's trouser leg open with a knife and started to **dress** his wounds. There was a lot of blood. Two marines dragged Sanchez up from the **paddy**. His

Lunatic chorus wailing:
Screaming of the incoming shells.

Constricted: Tightened.

Perimeter: Outer edge of their position.

Shrapnel: Shell fragments from an explosive weapon.

Fire-team: Squad of combat soldiers.

Ambush-detonated:
Explosion that is triggered by a nearby ambusher.

Corpsman: Soldier trained in giving medical treatment.

Dress: Bandage.

Paddy: Rice field.

A Helicopter Pilot Talks about Evacuating Wounded Soldiers

In 1966 Glenn Munson published a collection of letters written by American soldiers who served in Vietnam. This book, *Letters from Vietnam*, included the following letter written by airman Glen Kernak to his family:

It's no fun carrying 50 or 60 guys who are laid out on a stretcher moaning and crying and bleeding all over the place. It's a good thing that I am not home now, after all the bad stuff that I've seen over here. If anyone ever started talking about our position in Vietnam, and burning their draft cards, and all these protest marches—I swear I would kill him.

People don't realize what's going on over here. It is horrible, believe me, just plain rotten. These poor Army and Marine troops are living like animals and fighting for their lives every day they are in the field. Some come back, but some don't. I've carried some of the ones that didn't, and it makes you sick. Every time I carry these bodies in canvas bags and wounded GIs I get sick inside. You may think that I'm like a baby when I tell you that I have cried when I've carried these guys, but it's no lie, and I'm no baby for doing it.

Compresses: A soft bandage that is used to control bleeding.

Landing zone: An area that can be used by aircraft to land and take off.

Envelop: Cover or bury.

face had been so peppered with shrapnel that I hardly recognized him. Except for his eyes. The fragments had somehow missed his eyes. He was unconscious and his eyes were half closed; two white slits in a mass of raspberry red. Sanchez looked as if he had been clawed by some invisible beast. . . .

I slid down the embankment and splashed over to where the corpsman, Doc Kaiser, was working to save Corporal Rodella. There were gauze and compresses all over his chest and abdomen. One dressing, covering the hole the shrapnel had torn in one of his lungs, was soaked in blood. With each breath he took, pink bubbles of blood formed and burst around the hole. . . . I tried talking to him, but he could not say anything because his windpipe would fill with blood. Rodella, who had been twice wounded before, was now in danger of drowning in his own blood. It was his eyes that troubled me most. They were the hurt, dumb eyes of a child who has been severely beaten and does not know why. It was his eyes and his silence and the foamy blood and the gurgling, wheezing sound in his chest that aroused in me a sorrow so deep and a rage so strong that I could not distinguish the one emotion from the other.

I helped the corpsman carry Rodella to the landing zone. His comrades were around him, but he was alone. We could see the look of separation in his eyes. He was alone in the world of the badly wounded, isolated by a pain none could share with him and by the terror of the darkness that was threatening to envelop him.

Then we got the last one, Corporal Greeley, a machine-gunner whose left arm was hanging by a few strands of muscle; all the rest was a scarlet mush. . . . Carrying him, I felt my own anger, a very cold,

very deep anger that had no specific object. It was just an icy, **abiding** fury; a hatred for everything in existence except those men.

[Caputo calls for helicopter evacuation of the wounded soldiers.] The helicopters swooped in out of the **somber** sky, landing in the green smoke billowing from the smoke grenade I had thrown to mark the LZ. . . . We laid the casualties on the stretchers and lifted them into the **Hueys**, the rain falling on us all the time. The aircraft took off, and watching the wounded soaring out of that miserable patch of jungle, we almost envied them.

Just before the platoon resumed its march, someone found a length of electrical detonating cord lying in the grass near the village. The village would have been as likely an ambush site as any: the VC only had to press the detonator and then blend in with the civilians, if indeed there were any true civilians in the village. Or they could have hidden in one of the tunnels under the houses. All right, I thought, tit for tat. No cease-fire for us, none for you, either. I ordered both rocket launcher teams to fire **white-phosphorus** shells into the hamlet. They fired four altogether. The shells, flashing orange, burst into pure white clouds, the chunks of flaming phosphorus arcing over the tress. About half the village went up in flames. I could hear people yelling, and I saw several figures running through the white smoke. I did not feel a sense of vengeance, any more than I felt remorse or regret. I did not even feel angry. Listening to the shouts and watching the people running out of their burning homes, I did not feel anything at all.



Did you know . . .

- In conflicts like World War II and the Korean War, American soldiers entered the military knowing that they would remain in the service until the war was over. During the Vietnam War, however, soldiers served only one-year tours of duty before being released from their military obligations. Many observers believe that the one-year tour contributed to a decline in military performance. They claim that as support for the war dwindled, U.S. soldiers became preoccupied with completing their individual year of ser-

Abiding: Long-lasting or enduring.

Somber: Dark or gloomy.

LZ: Landing Zone.

Hueys: Military helicopters used to transport soldiers.

White-phosphorus: Explosive and fiery substance.

Remorse: Guilt or sadness.