

## ANALYSIS

### “Landing Zone Bravo” (1979)



Tim O'Brien

(1946- )

During the Vietnam War (1965-73) helicopters airlifted troops from U.S. bases and delivered them close to the enemy invading from the North and hiding in the jungle—the Communist Viet Cong. Their mission was to “search and destroy.” These missions became a principal means of waging the war and were routine for years. The mission dramatized by Tim O’Brien in “Landing Zone Bravo” represents them all and is a metaphor of the entire Vietnam War as a national mission.

O’Brien served in the Vietnam War himself, as a reluctant draftee. He felt divided over the war and named his hero Paul Berlin, the first name after a saint and the last after the city of Berlin, which at that time was divided by the infamous Wall constructed by the Communists of East Berlin to keep their people from running away. Many were shot there. Running away is the theme of O’Brien’s anti-war novel *Going after Cacciato* (1979). “Landing Zone Bravo” is Chapter 20 of the novel and has the integrity of a short story. The title refers to a helicopter landing site, identified by the letter B—the military term Bravo. The designation “bravo” becomes intensely, bitterly, shockingly ironic at the end of the story.

“They sat in two facing rows.” We are in a combat helicopter descending toward its landing zone. Seven of the nearest troops are introduced quickly—time is running out—and are characterized by what they are doing. From the outset the style is plain, terse and vivid, the short clipped sentences evoking breathless excitement, anticipation and suspense—dynamic with verbs: “sweating,” “clicking his teeth,” and “moved his neck as if loosening up for a race.” Two are sharing a Coke and one smiles, nervously. Sharing is a theme here as these men are members of a combat unit whose lives depend on one another. The first paragraph ends with Jim Pederson, who will single himself out as the protagonist. He is nauseous and holding his stomach. “Flying scared him more than the war.”

“There was a long floating feeling as the Chinook fell.” The Chinook is a large helicopter for carrying troops, an Indian word meaning a strong warm wind. The style here is objective Realism in the manner of Hemingway, a clear and acknowledged influence on O’Brien. Above all, both writers evoke feelings through sentence rhythms, authentic details, and the “objective correlative”—T. S. Eliot’s term for the exact combination of situation, action and style that will elicit the appropriate emotion. Hemingway and O’Brien want above all to give the reader a vicarious experience of what something felt like—the truth—

the primary value of all Realists. This story is brilliant in style, especially in the control of rhythms through varying sentence lengths, repetition, ironies, motifs, symbolism, and resonance.

The helicopter “dropped a hundred feet, rose, bounced, and cold air shot through the open tail section.” This dropping of the chopper is like being in an elevator that drops too fast—*for a hundred feet!* We feel this familiar sensation vicariously as the “objective correlative” for the anxiety of the troops as they approach landing zone bravo, where bravery and perhaps death will be required. Cold becomes a motif connoting fear and holding back—Pederson and Berlin are both hugging themselves—in contrast to the incessant attack by fierce hot machine guns firing down into the jungle to keep the enemy back until the troops can be landed. The dynamic of cold versus hot intensifies with the firing.

The words *firing*, *fired*, and *fire* occur 48 times in the 7+ pages of the story, increasing in frequency as the attack proceeds, repetition that is O’Brien’s most effective technique in unifying and intensifying the action. U.S. commanders in Vietnam believed that they could win the war with superior technology and overwhelming firepower, evoked here by incessant firing with increasing intensity. The blind faith in firepower is imaged in the door gunners “blind behind their sunglasses.” The more they fire the better in defense of the troops about to land, but “the door gunners did not have faces.” They are dehumanized. Cogs in the national war machine, they fire anonymously, indiscriminately, without accountability: “the gunners went mad with the firing, firing at everything”; “The gunners went berserk with their firing”; “firing with the steady sweeping motions of a machine.”

Another unifying device that adds to suspense is the steady measured countdown by the crew chief, holding up his fingers. He represents military authority as the troops experience it—absolute, inescapable, callous, and detached. A sergeant, he is more capable than the officer present, as was usually the case (speaking as a former lieutenant). The lieutenant, usually inexperienced, is sitting down on the floor attending to his weapon, as if confiding to it rather than to his men. To the crew chief this mission is so routine that he is preoccupied reading a copy of *Newsweek* until the wind snatches it away. He cares more about his magazine than he does about Pederson when he throws him out of the helicopter into the mud. The crew chief illustrates the bizarre uniqueness of the Vietnam War, in which troops were abruptly transported from civilization into the jungle, from the comforts of a large base camp into the desperate savagery of jungle warfare.

Oscar Johnson lights a marijuana joint and passes it around in a bonding moment before the battle. Although drug use in combat was a court martial offense and would have been unthinkable in previous wars, it was routine in Vietnam. The lieutenant does not interfere. Discipline was breaking down in the military as well as in society during the 1960s. During the war there were over 220 reported incidents of “fragging,” in which troops at platoon level determined to survive resorted to killing their own officers—usually inexperienced lieutenants—often by rolling a fragmentation grenade into their tents at night. Most of the many fraggings went unreported.

Paul Berlin is shivering from “the awful cold” as the crew chief shouts “Going in... She’s hot, kiddies. Everybody off fast, no dilly-dally shit.” Cold to hot. Another such counterpoint is between their cold fear of death and the warm smiling and giggling of some troops (they are high). The lieutenant is supposed to be on his feet leading the men but he is “still wiping his rifle, leaning close to it and whispering” as if praying to his gun instead of God. None of the troops gives any evidence of religious faith, which is unrealistic but politically correct. This story is Postmodern in being (1) atheistic; (2) without transcendence except through group “sharing” and drug use; (3) disrespectful of authority; (4) anti-military; (5) anti-American “imperialism”; (6) yet *for* violence in revenge for “victimization”; and (6) for idealizing the violent rebel victim as a hero.

Harold Murphy gets hit by shots coming up from the jungle through the bottom of the helicopter, severely enough that he cannot get up, yet he keeps trying—and keeps smiling. Transcending severe pain and bad luck, he is a model soldier. He sets up a counterpoint with Pederson, who has an upset tummy and disobeys orders and will not get out of the chopper. He forces the chopper to hover, at risk of getting blown up by the enemy at any moment. The crew chief has to drag and throw him out into the mud. By military standards Pederson is a coward who betrays his fellows and endangers their lives and jeopardizes the whole

mission. By the countercultural standards of Postmodernism the crew chief violated the right of Pederson to opt out of the mission (at the last minute).

As implied by the name Berlin, the author wants to present a divided perspective. "Pederson paused a moment, as if searching for balance in the muck, then he began wading with his eyes closed." Similarly, O'Brien tries to balance military and countercultural values (puritan and pastoral, head and heart), but like Pederson he loses his balance. The reader is inclined to sympathize with the underdog--the individual against the war machine--especially when impelled to do so by the rhetoric, symbolism, and ironic power of O'Brien's ending. "The Chinook's shadow passed right over him." The shadow is a traditional image of negative traits, in this case the overbearing American military machine. At the end Paul Berlin can still hear the guns of the chopper firing in the distance. O'Brien is sentimental in celebrating the defiant violence of the 1960s antiwar rebel, whereas Melville is tragic in his depiction of Billy Budd.

The crew chief warned against any "dilly-dally shit." Pederson will not even move. Thrown out, he loses his helmet and blunders around "with his eyes closed." He dilly-dallies so long on the landing zone he gets shot in the covering fire from the chopper. Getting shot is his own fault. The door gunners did not shoot him on purpose, their firing is standard defensive procedure—as he knows. Pederson deliberately shoots at the chopper and may have killed men who meant him no harm, duplicating the moral evil of the indiscriminate American war machine. His gunfire could have brought down the chopper, killing the whole crew. What he does is worse than a fragging. The platoon will be better off *without* Pederson.

Michael Hollister (2013)