



## BOOK REVIEW\*

*A Rumor of War*, by Philip Caputo (\$10, Holt, Rinehard & Winston, Inc., 346 pages).

Reviewed by: Major General Paul F. Gorman, Commanding General, 8th Infantry Division.

The Moscow correspondent of the *Chicago Tribune* has written about his experiences as a platoon leader and battalion staff officer in 1st Battalion, 3d Marines (1965) and as platoon leader in 1st Battalion, 1st Marines (1965-66). On the jacket, a respected U.S. Army historian rejoices:

I had begun to abandon hope that a spokesman would emerge to tell the true story of the fighting man in the enigmatic Vietnam war. No longer. Philip Caputo has done it and done it brilliantly.

Well, not so. Arthur Caputo is no Charles B. MacDonald, who encapsulated World War II in his *Company Commander*. He is, rather, a would-be Siegfried Sassoon, who wrote *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* in the mid-1920's. But while Mr. Sassoon's Lt. Sherston ascends from a fox-hunting youth and the muck of the Somme to nobility in his public stand against "The War," Lt. Caputo stumbles into moral quicksand outside Danang and, sucked down to barbarism and murder, clutches desperately at opposition to war.

Mr. Sassoon ends his book with Lt. Sherston committed to a mental hospital with "shell shock." Lt. Caputo does a stint with the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (he mailed his medals to the White House), knocks about as a correspondent and finished his book in 1975, back in Vietnam:

It soon became clear that even ten years has not been long enough to break the emotional embrace in which the war held me . . . I had to go back . . . we had marched into Vietnam, swaggering, confident and full of idealism . . . But somehow our idealism was lost, our morals corrupted and the purpose forgotten.

Concerning purpose, Mr. Caputo is vague: "We thought we were going to win the war in a few months and then march home to ticker-tape parades."

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How they expected to win, he does not say, except to quote the Commandant of the Marine Corps who told the brigade in Danang that they were there to kill Vietcong.

Even for that mission, the author seemed burdened with tactical notions more advantageous to the VC than his Marines. Lt. Caputo has been instilled with the spirit of the offensive, convinced that its essence was frontal assault—"no tricky flanking or encircling movements, just a line of determined men firing short bursts from the hips as they advanced on the enemy at a stately walk."

His brigade commander reportedly ordered bunkers torn down lest they attenuate that offensive spirit. Little military finesse is evident in this record and offensive spirit or not much of Lt. Caputo's war was spent on the defensive. When the enemy proved to be both persistent and elusive, Caputo succumbed to frustration and ire.

As an assistant battalion adjutant in 1965, "death's bookkeeper," he festered on reported VC atrocities:

I burned with a hatred for the Vietcong and with an emotion that dwells in most of us, one closer to the surface than we care to admit: a desire for retribution . . . . Revenge was one of the reasons I volunteered for a line company. I wanted a chance to kill somebody.

Concerning morals, the author seems to have started with little and ended with less. Certainly he relishes moral overtones (his title alludes to Matthew 24:6-13). After his first action, he and his men were given pause by the sight of enemy dead:

. . . for all its intensity, our Marine training had not completely erased the years we had spent at home, at school, in church learning that human life was precious and the taking of it wrong.

But moral erasure came soon thereafter, for Lt. Caputo proved extraordinarily sensitive to carnage:

The sight of mutilation . . . burst the religious myths of my Catholic childhood . . . I could not believe those bloody messes would be capable of a resurrection on the Last Day.

He evidently relied less on his moral upbringing than on Marine machismo and the USMC analogue of *furor Gallicae*. Lt. Caputo describes

officer trainees shouting, "Gung ho! Gung ho! Pray for war," and the sergeant instructor requiring his troops to chant "Ambushes are murder and murder is fun."

He tells of his own drinking and whoring in Danang on liberty (he tried drinking with his troops but decided that leveling does not work, presumably because his Marines preferred to talk about cars rather than Shakespeare, and he nearly made the mistake of using prostitutes who serviced enlisted men).

He seems knowledgeable about Vietnam's drugs. He quotes a salty old NCO, who told him about Marines shooting Korean farmers and prophesied that before the lieutenant left Vietnam he would come to understand that "one of the most brutal things in the world is your average 19-year-old American boy."

At first disinclined to believe, the author records incident after incident that proved the sergeant right.

Concerning lost idealism, Lt. Caputo recounts how he turned to the Marine Corps to escape hometown humdrum. He embraced avidly the Corp's indoctrination. He went AWOL from the Quantico hospital to attend the 1964 Marine Corps Birthday Ball. Expecting "Beowulf's mead hall," he found liturgy, the full dress conjuring up coped priests and cardinals assembled beneath gleaming silver trophies:

TO THE UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS, read the inscription on one, from the 1ST BATTALION, ROYAL WELCH FUSILIERS, PEKING, 1900. Toasts were made, and wineglasses raised, lowered, raised again, like chalices at some strange Mass.

(Surely Caputo knew that Sassoon served in the 1st Royal Welch Fusiliers during the First Somme.) For Lt. Caputo, that occasion came to symbolize USMC in the "innocent time before Vietnam," because at Danang he found that he had traded "marriage, mortgages and building a civilian career" for grotesque servitude.

One battalion commander had him park a jeep trailer full of VC dead outside his office for the edification of clerks, and later recalled the trailerload from the cemetery so that a visiting Army general could be similarly advantaged. A second battalion commander diverted him from building fortifications to construction of a horseshoe court, and from his

staff duties to the running of a football pool.

Author Caputo denigrates the leadership of his country and his Corps from President John F. Kennedy down. He came to value the closeness within infantry battalions: "in comradeship we found an affirmation of life," but he goes on to link that very intimacy to his war's monstrosities, holding that Marines, because of those close ties, when their friends were hurt, turned with blind destructiveness on Vietnamese—civilians included.

Eventually, Caputo saw himself and his men as cogs in a killing machine, fighting for arithmetic, numbed and brutalized: "In the patriotic fervor of the Kennedy years, we had asked, 'What can we do for our country?' and our country answered, 'Kill VC.'" And yet, he writes:

Anyone who fought in Vietnam, if he is honest with himself, will have to admit that he enjoyed the compelling attractiveness of combat . . . . It was something like the elevated state of awareness induced by drugs. And it could be just as addictive, for it made whatever else life offered in the way of delights or torments seem pedestrian.

He acknowledges that he cannot reconcile his attraction to combat with his repugnance to war. He works hardest at the latter. Most of the book trudges through macabre recitations of the author's grim encounters with death and depravity. Twice platoons under his command erupt into a frenzy amid villages, burning and killing wantonly. Enemy wounded are shot, prisoners are abused, enemy dead are mutilated.

And finally, Caputo orders a patrol into a nearby village to capture or kill two reported VC. The patrol kills and it turns out that the victims are not VC. Lt. Caputo's men are brought to trial and after long proceedings the first tried is acquitted. Lt. Caputo gets off with a reprimand for attempting to conceal the circumstances of the mission. Thereafter, he sets out to end the war by attacking its popular support.

The author denies in his prologue that his book is a confessional. But confession is now in vogue and this book has all the hallmarks of the genre: the author seeks public forgiveness for mortal sins, committed out of zeal, mitigated by the fact that he acted like any other American male in a similar circumstance would have acted.

Giving him the benefit of the doubt and accepting his contention that the book is merely "a story about war," a "record of a long and sometimes painful personal experience," it is important to observe that the book is hardly representative of the experience of lieutenants in Vietnam and is certainly not the "true story" of the fighting man in that war.

As a matter of fact, the author, by asserting that the war from 1965 on was characterized by atrocity on both sides, adds to the enigma of Vietnam with one more geographic and temporal generalization concerning a conflict which was highly particularized by time, place and unit. Call the book an articulate but saddening journal of an officer tried and found wanting.

We shall have to look further for Vietnam's MacDonal. As for the reviewer, put me down as preferring Sassoon to Caputo. I cannot identify with Lt. Caputo, but Lt. Sherston still speaks powerfully for me. My months in I Corps amid mountains and monsoon evoke:

. . . an intense memory of men whose courage had shown me the power of the human spirit—that spirit which could withstand the utmost assault. Such men had inspired me to be at my best when things were very bad, and they outweighed all failures.