

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 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, providing at once an explanation of the exhilaration combat can bring and a searing indictment of the brutalizing effect of the war on those condemned to experience it down where they do the dying.

Well, not so. Caputo is no Charles B. MacDonald, who encapsulated World War II in his Company Commander. He is, rather, a would-be Siegfried Sassoon. A Rumor of War is a mid-60's Memoirs of an Infantry Officer. But while Sassoon's Lt. Sherston ascends from a fox-hunting youth and and the muck of the Somme to nobility in his public stand against War, Lt. Caputo stumbles into moral quicksand outside Danang, and sucked down to barbarism and murder, clutches desperately at opposition to the war. Sassoon ends his book with Sherston committed to a mental hospital with "shell shock." 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 finishes 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, whatever the risks. I had to see the war end, even though it looked as if it was going to end in a defeat of the cause. I had served as a soldier. I cannot explain this feeling, . . . My mind shot back a decade, to the day we had marched into Vietnam, swaggering, confident, and full of idealism. We had believed we were there for high moral purpose. But somehow our idealism was lost, our morals corrupted, and the purpose forgotten. . .

Concerning purpose, Caputo is vague--"we thought we were going to win the war in a few months and then march home to ticker-tape parades." How they expected to win, he does not say, except to quote the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Greene, who told the Brigade in Danang that they were there to kill Viet Cong. When the enemy proved to be both persistent and elusive, Caputo succumbed to frustration and ire. As an assistant battalion adjutant in 1965, he was "death's bookkeeper" for his commander, and he festered on reported VC atrocities:

I burned with a hatred for the Viet Cong and with an emotion that dwells in most of us, one closer to the surface than we care to admit: a desire for retribution. I did not hate the enemy for their politics, but for murdering Simpson, for executing that boy whose body had been found in the river, for blasting the life out of Walt Levy. Revenge was one of the reasons I volunteered for a line company. I wanted a chance to kill somebody.

Concerning morals, Caputo seems to have started with little, and ended with less. Certainly ^{he relishes:} ~~there are~~ 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} ~~was sparse~~ thereafter, for Caputo proved extraordinarily sensitive to carnage:

The sight of mutilation did more than cause me physical revulsion; it burst the religious myths of my Catholic childhood. I could not look at those men and still believe that their souls had "passed on" to another existence, or that they had souls in the first place. I could not believe those bloody messes would be capable of a resurrection on the Last Day. . . .

Even for that mission, they were burdened with tactical notions more advantageous for VC killing Marines than vice versa: from Caputo, 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 steady walk" -- to his Brigade commander, who ordered bunkers torn down but they alternate that offensive spirit, little ^{military} finesse is evident in this record.

What took the place of moral upbringing was Marine machismo and the USMC analogue of furor Gallicae. Caputo describes officer trainees shouting GUNG HO! GUNG HO! PRAY FOR WAR, and the sergeant instructor in 1/3 requiring his troops to chant in unison AMBUSHES ARE MURDER AND MURDER IS FUN. He tells of his own drinking and whoring in Danang on liberty (Caputo 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 a prostitute who serviced enlisted men). He seems knowledgeable about Vietnam's drugs. He quotes an old salt NCO, who told him about Marines shooting Korean farmers, and prophesied that before Caputo left Vietnam, he would come to understand that "one of the most brutal things in the world is your average nineteen-year-old American boy." Caputo, at first disinclined to believe, records incident after incident proving the sergeant right, and dulling his sensibilities further.

Concerning lost idealism, Caputo is more convincing. He recounts how he first embraced the Marine Corps for personal independence, an opportunity to escape hometown humdrum. He responded avidly to the Corps' indoctrination. Just after he was commissioned, he went AWOL from the Quantico hospital to attend the 1964 Marine Corps Birthday Ball.

Expecting Beowulf's mead hall, he found ^{liturgy,} ~~an ecclesiastical assemblage,~~ ^{the} ~~full dress conjuring upon assembled~~ ^{coped} ~~cardinals and popes~~ ^{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 Caputo, that} ~~The~~ occasion came to symbolize ~~for him~~ USMC in the "innocent time before Vietnam," ^{because} ~~for~~ at Danang he found that he had traded marriage, mortgages, and building a civilian career for grotesque servility. One battalion commander had him park a jeep trailer full of VC dead outside his office for the edification of the clerks, and later recalled the trailer load from the cemetery so the visiting Army general could be similarly advantaged. Another 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. Caputo denigrates the leadership of his country and his Corps from President Kennedy down. Of officers above the rank of captain only General Lew Walt seemed to have earned his respect (and even Walt turned out to have feet of clay during General Thi's revolt). Yet, he came to value highly the comradeship in infantry battalions: . . . "in comradeship we found an affirmation of life and the means to preserve at least a vestige of our humanity." But he goes on to link that very intimacy to his war's monstrosities, holding that out of those close ties, when their friends were hurt, Marines turned with blind destructiveness on any Vietnamese, civilians included. Eventually, Caputo saw himself and his men as cogs in a killing machine, fighting a war 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 still, 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 a peculiar enjoyment because it was mixed with commensurate pain. Under fire, a man's powers of life heightened in proportion to the proximity of death, so that he felt an elation as extreme as his dread. His senses quickened, he attained an acuity of consciousness at once pleasurable and excruciating. 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.

Caputo acknowledges that he cannot reconcile his attraction to combat with his repugnance to war. He wrote his book to dramatize the latter. The first third of the book develops better the former, containing passages as good as anything yet written on platoon level combat. But most of the book trudges through macabre recitations of Caputo'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 then 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. Caputo's men are brought to trial, and after long proceedings, the first tried is acquitted. 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 Caputo 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 most lieutenants in Vietnam, and cannot be said to tell the "true story" of the fighting man in that war. As a matter of fact, Caputo, 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 one young officer, tried and found wanting.

We shall have to look further for Vietnam's MacDonald. As for the reviewer, put me down as preferring Sassoon to Caputo. I cannot identify with Feisty Phil, but Sherston still speaks powerfully for me. ~~as I call to mind~~ My months amid mountains and monsoons ~~which for me too,~~ 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. . . .