

Courage and Prowess Afoot in Homer and the Vietnam of Tim O'Brien*

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I remembered the truth that in war the legs are far more important than the arms.

Bill Broyles, *Brothers in Arms*, 25

Combat makes you realize how unspeakably lucky you are to have lost, as yet, no limbs.

Paul Fussell, *Doing Battle*, 135¹

Feet and legs define the role of the soldier in infantry fighting. It is my purpose in this paper to explore how and why imagery relating to legs and feet was used in Homer's *Iliad* and by Tim O'Brien in his first major work about the Vietnam War in order to communicate the essence of war and how individuals perform in the sphere of combat. This parallelism between Homer and O'Brien is not accidental. It is due to real constants in the nature of infantry fighting whether on the plains of Troy or in the jungles and rice paddies of Vietnam: the value of good legs in combat, of good looks in leadership, the scarcity of real courage in combat situations and its extraordinary effect on others who witness

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¹ William Broyles, Jr., *Brothers in Arms* (New York: Knopf, 1986), speaking of his experiences in Vietnam; Paul Fussell, *Doing Battle* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co, 1996), speaking of his experiences in World War II.

it. But it is also due to the fact that O'Brien in his first work² consciously uses themes and passages from classical literature, particularly from Homer and Plato, in trying to make sense of the Vietnam War and what it did to the men and women who fought in it.

O'Brien's entire memoir/novel can be viewed as a meditation upon idealized notions of "personal courage and proper action" surrounding the martial virtue of ἀρετή and how ultimately they are inapplicable to the experience of regular infantry soldiers in Vietnam.³ Central to O'Brien's consequent and necessary redefinition of courageous behavior is his understanding of how his fellow soldiers use their legs and feet. He shares this understanding with Homer who uses imagery of feet and legs for the same purpose.⁴ However, Homer's definition of martial courage differs from O'Brien's because of differences in the specific conditions of combat and in the rank of combatants who are the primary subjects of narrative treatment. O'Brien contrasts the slow, deliberate and anxious placement of feet upon the booby-trapped and land-mined terrain of Vietnam with the Homeric ideal of swift mobility across the windswept plains outside Troy in order to contrast the "survival mode" of the typical "grunt" "humping it" in Vietnam with the aristocratic pursuit of κλέος by swift-footed Homeric warrior chieftains.

Exploration of such intersections between Homeric epic and writing about Vietnam also sheds reflected light on how combat is described in the *Iliad*, specifically the remarkable emphasis on foot speed as the defining attribute of its central hero Achilles and as an essential in fighting with the hurling spear, the chief form of combat attested in the *Iliad* and in the Linear B tablets from the late Greek Bronze Age. Those who understand the realities of armed infantry fighting, ancient or modern, may well be astonished at Homer's tales of heroic warriors sprinting in combat. The equipment of Homeric chieftains and classical hoplites (helmet, breast-plate, greaves, shield, sword and spear) encumbered them as much as the gear that weighed down the typical

² *If I Die In a Combat Zone Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York: Delacorte, 1973) and edition with author's revisions (New York: Dell, 1979). Hereafter *Combat Zone* (1973) and *Combat Zone* (1979).

³ These notions are derived from the cultural myths to which the young soldier-memoirist O'Brien had been exposed in growing up and in high school and college: American literature and film, British and American poetry, classical literature and philosophy, even pop music. Cf. T. Myers, *Walking Point: American Narratives of Vietnam* (New York: Oxford U Pr, 1988), 70-89.

⁴ Cf. R. Dunkle, "Swift-Footed Achilles," *Classical World* 90:4 (1997): 227-234.

“grunt” in Vietnam. This is what made movement on the run by Athenian hoplites at Marathon so unexpected and therefore effective a tactic.⁵ Tim O’Brien in his best-known short story, “The Things They Carried,” communicates the psychological and real burdens of infantry soldiers in Vietnam by progressively weighing us down as he itemizes piece by piece the paraphernalia—standard issue, special equipment and psychologically necessary personal items (Kool-Aid, a girlfriend’s panty hose, an illustrated New Testament, scented hotel soap, comic books, condoms, a family hunting hatchet, and M&M’s for treating the worst wounds)—that the men in his unit “humped.”⁶ Five-pound steel helmets, steel-centered nylon flak jackets (6.7 lbs.), green plastic ponchos (2 lbs.), M-16 gas-operated assault weapons (7.5 lbs.) with eight to fourteen pounds of ammunition, fourteen-ounce fragmentation grenades, and more encumbered every man. The minimum weight per soldier totals just over sixty-five pounds. The maximum well over a hundred. O’Brien even introduces us to the overall size of his unit through the arithmetic of the weight of things carried. In order to blow tunnels in the Than Khe area south of Chu Lai, the men carried one-pound blocks of pentrite high explosives, four blocks to a man, sixty-eight pounds in all.⁷ Homer’s aristocratic heroes run and run swiftly. O’Brien’s fellow soldiers, with a single notable exception, trudge and slog.

Jonathan Shay’s celebrated study⁸ of the symptoms, and causes, of combat-related post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as depicted in Homer’s *Iliad* and experienced by veterans of the Vietnam War has focused the attention of humanists on the universal and enduring realities of warfare in the earliest western epic. There has been extensive recent discussion of the parallels that can be drawn between the

⁵ Herodotus 6.112 remarks that the Athenian foot soldiers at Marathon were the first in the history of Greek warfare to advance on the run and that the Persians thought that the Athenians were mad to do so and bent on their own total self-destruction.

⁶ In T. O’Brien, *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 3-25, and selected by John Updike as the only “war story” among the fifty-five best American short stories of the last century. J. Updike and K. Kenison, *The Best American Short Stories of the Century* (Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1999), 616-632.

⁷ O’Brien (above, note 6) 10. This is the first time the reader knows that there are seventeen men in O’Brien’s unit.

⁸ J. Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Atheneum, 1994).

experiences of Bronze-Age heroes fighting on the plains of Troy and those of soldiers at war at other times, in other places, and in other works of literature or art.⁹ O’Brien’s *Combat Zone* has been overlooked in this discussion, despite the fact that it is, in its use of themes from the *Iliad* as reference points for interpreting the experiences of soldiers in Vietnam, the firsthand literary equivalent to Shay’s *Achilles in Vietnam*. Literary criticism of *Combat Zone* has tended to focus on issues of its genre definition and narrative strategies, rather than on O’Brien’s deliberate use of classical or Homeric themes.¹⁰

The legs and feet of foot soldiers put them “on the ground” and expose them to harm and death. It is also through their legs and feet that they can escape mortal danger and display prowess that is honored by their peers and by the societies that send them off to do battle. This was recognized in the Homeric tradition. It is also understood by men who have fought on their feet, and even by those who have not fought, but who have heard stories, seen images, and can sympathize with foot soldiers, infantrymen, “grunts.”

⁹ See especially the collection of articles in the issue of *Classical Bulletin* 71:2 (1995) devoted to “Understanding Achilles.” These articles examine among other topics: 1. the thematic parallels between Achilles and the android Roy Batty in Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* and the novel on which that film is based; 2. Achilles and Yossarian in Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*; and 3. Achilles and Colonel Kurtz in Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now*. They also consider the character and ethics of Achilles and whether Achilles should be understood as a tragic hero or explained as a victim of the kind of combat trauma suffered by Vietnam veterans with PTSD. A similar approach is followed by James Tatum, “Memorials of the American War in Vietnam,” *Critical Inquiry* 22:4 (1996): 635-650, figs. 1-38. Tatum grounds his study of how Americans and Vietnamese memorialize the war and its dead in an opening discussion of how the ancient Greeks represented the meeting of Priam and Achilles in the *Iliad* and in later vase painting.

¹⁰ Cf. E. J. Schroeder, “The Past and Possible: Tim O’Brien’s Dialectic of Memory and Imagination,” in W. J. Searle, ed., *Search and Clear: Critical Responses to Selected Literature and Films of the Vietnam War* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green St U Popular Pr, 1988), 116-133. This preoccupation with whether *Combat Zone* is memoir or novel, non-fiction or fiction, is partly due to O’Brien’s own genuine reluctance to explain his literary intentions, his insistence that he is just telling stories, and his subsequent blurring of the boundaries between truth and fiction. Cf. E. J. Schroeder, “Two Interviews: Talks with Tim O’Brien and Robert Stone,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 30:1 (Spring 1984): 136-163. On the manipulation of narrative perspective in *Combat Zone*, cf. Mats Tegmark, *In the Shoes of a Soldier* (Uppsala: *Studia Anglistica Upsaliensia* 105, 1998), 76-134, the very title of which emphasizes the preoccupation with feet in O’Brien’s three main war novels.

On an early morning in Hanoi in autumn 1984, Bill Broyles, one of the first American veterans to return to Vietnam, went out jogging and met up with soldiers of the Vietnam Army track team:¹¹

They invited me to join them. I kept up for one lap, as the old couples playing badminton cheered and the young women doing their exercises stopped to watch. But they picked up the pace for the second lap and I coasted to a stop.

After the race the young man who won picked out a bench in the center of the park and ostentatiously did ten push-ups. I quietly lowered myself to the ground and did fifty. When I got back up I was greeted with whistles and applause. And then I remembered *the truth that in war the legs are far more important than the arms, and size and strength are no match for mobility and endurance.*

This same truth is revealed in Homer's *Iliad* where the epithets πόδας ὠκύς ("swift afoot"), ποδώκης ("swift-footed"), and ποδάρεκτος ("relying on his feet") are used almost eighty times and all but once of Achilles.¹² Mobility and endurance, "good legs," are what elite Mycenaean and Homeric warriors need most.

The supreme Homeric warrior hero is swift-footed and he relies on his feet. This is a truth in Homer who is photorealistic about warfare and what it does to those who fight and those who are fought for. But it is a selective truth. While Homer concentrates on the foot prowess of the elite warriors, the rank-and-file Myrmidons, Achaeans, Danaans and Argives may well have slogged slowly under their burdens much like infantrymen in modern warfare.¹³

Roger Dunkle has recently reemphasized how central prowess afoot is to the identity and heroism of Achilles.¹⁴ Archaeological and

¹¹ W. Broyles, Jr. (above, note 1), 24-25. Italics mine.

¹² G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 1979), 326-327. Hector likewise is hymned for his rapid movements in fighting (below, note 31).

¹³ Disciplined feet and sturdy legs supported massed movements of common soldiers such as the mustering of troops preceding the Catalogue of Ships in *Iliad* Book 2 and the deployment of troops to coastal command units in late Bronze Age Messenia (the Pylos *o-ka* tablets). For the latter, cf. J. Chadwick, *The Mycenaean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1976), 175-178.

¹⁴ Dunkle (above, note 4). Dunkle also suggests that Homer highlights the new "heroism" displayed by Achilles at the end of the *Iliad* by having Achilles *not* employ his speed successfully on two important occasions: (1) in the ultimate military action of the entire epic, the hunting down of Hector in Book 22; and (2) during the funeral games for Patroclus through which the Achaean social order and Achilles' place within it are reconstituted.

textual evidence from the late Greek Bronze Age suggests that the select warriors supplied with palatial-quality weaponry also would have needed to be fast and agile afoot, at least in bursts.¹⁵ The swords from the period of Shaft Graves (ca. 1650-1470 BCE) through to the end of Mycenaean palatial culture (ca. 1200 BCE) were ineffective in balance point, hafting and durability.¹⁶ They easily shattered. More reliable as prime weapons of warfare, and easier to mass manufacture, were spears and javelins. The hurling, running, thrusting and dodging of spear warfare among elite warriors would have placed a premium on agility, speed and endurance afoot. Notice how prominent feet and spears are in this representative battle scene (*Iliad* 20.407-418):

Achilles next went after Polydorus,
Priam's son. His father would not allow him
To fight at all, since he was his youngest
And the apple of his eye. He was the fastest too,
And now he was childishly showing off
Just how fast he was, running through the front lines
Until he lost his life. Achilles, the great sprinter,
Hit him in the back as he flashed by,
The spear going through just where the corselet
Folded under the golden clasps of his belt
And exiting just beside his navel.
He fell to his knees with a groan, and as he sank
In the dark mist, he clutched his bowels to him.
(trans. S. Lombardo, *Iliad* 20.420-32¹⁷)

The Linear B tablets from Knossos and Pylos attest to the vital concern of the palatial centers with manufacturing points made of bronze and flint for spears (ἔγχεσι) and javelins (παλτοῖη) and with requisitioning suitable wood for working into spear shafts (δογμαί), including shafts specifically described as "for infantry spears" (*πεδιήφιαι sc. ἐγγεῖλαι).¹⁸

¹⁵ Cf. A. Peatfield, "The Paradox of Violence: Weaponry and Martial Art in Minoan Crete," in R. Laffineur, ed., *Polemos: Le Contexte Guerrier en Égée à l'Âge du Bronze* (Aegaeum 19:1: Liège and Austin, 1999), 67-74.

¹⁶ Scenes like the shattering of Menelaus' sword when he strikes Paris' helmet with it (*Il.* 3.361-363) would have been common. Due to their technical unreliability, swords would have been used for killing thrusts to the throat, as in scenes from Shaft Grave art, and would have been ineffective for slashing.

¹⁷ S. Lombardo trans., Homer, *Iliad* (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1997), 399.

¹⁸ M. Ventris and J. Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek*² (Cambridge: Cambridge U Pr, 1973), 356-358, 511-514. A tablet like Pylos Jn 829 records a

Unlike swords, spears are found almost universally in warrior burials of the period and remind us of the predominance of fighting with spears in the *Iliad*.¹⁹

How much do other authors about modern infantry warfare share the special insight of Homer and Broyles? Are such authors making use of Homeric and classical tradition or independently reflecting universal realities of combat on the ground? We are well aware of the influence of the classical tradition on British "public school" poets in creating a race of "unicorns" ready and naively enthusiastic to meet death on the western front or the Gallipoli peninsula.²⁰ At the opening of WW I the Classics shepherded flocks of romantic sheep to slaughter by "encourag[ing] a detached perspective" and "offering the soldier . . . the intoxicating prospect of a place in history and literature."²¹ Rupert Brooke, on orders to be sent to the Dardanelles, could speculate dreamily about the prospects of engaging the enemy on the hallowed ground where Trojan and Achaean warriors fought and fought again for ten brutalizing years:²²

Do you *think* perhaps the fort on the Asiatic corner will want *quelling*,
and we'll land and come at it from behind and they'll make a sortie and meet
us on the plains of Troy? . . .

I've never been quite so happy in my life, I think. Not quite so
pervasively happy. . . .

The war to end all wars was also the beginning of the end of this kind of blind romantic use of Homer and the Classics. But it was not the end of manipulating the classical tradition in writing about war.

requisition of recycled "temple" bronze sufficient to manufacture ca. 150 large bronze spear points of the sort attested in Warrior Graves at Knossos.

¹⁹ Cf. the course of the initial combat between Paris and Menelaus in *Il.* 3.15-20 and 3.343-360.

²⁰ The "unicorn" image is found in Keith Douglass' poem "Aristocrats," in which it is applied to the literally dying breed of classically educated young men offering themselves with decorous *sang froid* for mass extinction during the African campaign in World War II. Douglass uses an ironic epigraph from classical literature (Suetonius, *Vespasian* 23). Cf. J. Stallworthy, ed., *The Oxford Book of War Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford U Pr, 1984), 268-269.

²¹ J. Stallworthy (above, note 20) xxvii.

²² G. Keynes, ed., *The Letters of Rupert Brooke* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 662-663.

Paul Fussell, himself a veteran of World War II, has observed that "[a]ll war is ironic because every war is worse than expected,"²³ thus drawing our attention to universal aspects of war and of human reactions to it. Fussell's observation also helps us to understand why the first reaction to the romantic use of the Classics was irony. Wilfred Owen's brutally graphic refutation of the old Horatian lie opens with the irony of feet and legs:²⁴

Bent double, like old beggars under sacks,
Knock-kneed, coughing like hags, we cursed through sludge,
Till on the haunting flares we turned our backs
And towards our distant rest began to trudge.
Man marched asleep. Many had lost their boots
But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame. . . .

No shot is fired, no man is killed, but with these six lines, glory and honor and the sweetness of youthful self-sacrifice as ideals in modern mechanized warfare have been forever called into question.

In *Combat Zone*, the young Vietnam veteran Tim O'Brien, the most creative and passionate writer of the Vietnam generation, likewise questions the meaning of war for the individual foot soldier. O'Brien taps into Homer's understanding of what feet and legs signify for infantry soldiers and uses it to reveal intimate truths about his own experience in Vietnam. This is the only one of O'Brien's many works of "fiction" in which he uses classical literature to clarify and come to terms with what war on the ground in places like My Khe and My Lai meant for himself and his fellow foot soldiers.²⁵ The protagonist of *Combat Zone*, Tim O'Brien the soldier, discusses and quotes from Plato's *Laches* on courage. He refers to the figure of Socrates in the *Crito* and his decision to face certain death rather than renege on his agreement

²³ P. Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (New York and London: Oxford U Pr, 1975), 18.

²⁴ W. Owen, "Dulce Et Decorum Est," in C. Day Lewis, ed., *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen* (New York: New Directions, 1964), 55-56. Recall the irony of Douglass (above, note 20).

²⁵ All but the most recent of O'Brien's later novels grapple with Vietnam and its moral and psychological effects and after-effects on human beings and the human spirit: *Going After Cacciato* (New York: Dell, 1978); *The Things They Carried* (above, note 6, 1990); *In the Lake of the Woods* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1994). Many of the themes in *The Things They Carried* are identical to those treated nearly twenty years earlier in *Combat Zone*, but all the classical baggage has been removed. Jettisoned, too, are T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, Ernest Hemingway, Humphrey Bogart, Alan Ladd as Shane, the Beatles, Paul Simon and Arthur Garfunkel.

with the laws of his country.²⁶ He traces the tradition of guard duty back to “Thucydides and Polybius and Julius Caesar.” He compares the replacement of his platoon’s leader, Captain Johansen, to “the Trojans losing Hector.” He calls the thinking of a fellow grunt about the necessity of warfare “an Aristotelian ethic,” and late in the novel, after writing again and again about ghastly and pointless human suffering, he amplifies Owen’s message: “Horace’s old do-or-die aphorism—‘Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori’—was just an epitaph for the insane.”²⁷ Earlier he imagines Socrates as a fellow recruit, and in boot camp he quotes his fellow “college pussy” friend Erik as saying, “We come to Fort Lewis afraid to admit we are not Achilles, that we are not brave, not heroes.” Chapter two is entitled “Pro Patria.” Chapter twelve “Mori.” Chapter nineteen “Dulce et Decorum.” The second-last chapter, “Courage Is a Certain Kind of Preserving,” begins with a discussion of a lengthy passage from *Republic* 429b-429c; and its main character is one Major Callicles. O’Brien even discusses the use of reported speech in his book in Thucydidean terms: “I’d make up dialogue that seemed true to the spirit of what was said.”²⁸

Classical texts and themes provide a resonance for O’Brien’s own experience in Vietnam. They also seem to have formed the intellectual basis for the value system which guided him all the way to Vietnam and through which he filters his Vietnam experience. As Thomas Myers has explained, O’Brien uses classical and other literary and cultural reference points in a highly personal quest to understand what it is that his fellow soldiers and he *should* be doing in Vietnam, how they *should* be acting.²⁹ Despite his bitter assessment of Horace’s *dulce et decorum est*—interpreted by O’Brien without any recognition of Horatian irony—as an “epitaph for the insane,” O’Brien believes that some kinds of virtue operate even in Vietnam. He identifies the kind of courage that is defined as “wise endurance” in the *Laches* of Plato as an ideal of honorable behavior that might apply in Vietnam. But he is fully aware that “most soldiers in

²⁶ Paralleling O’Brien’s own anxious decision about whether to evade the draft.

²⁷ *Combat Zone* (1973), 168.

²⁸ E. J. Schroeder (above, note 10), *Modern Fiction Studies* 30:1 (Spring 1984): 136. Cf. Thuc. 1.22.

²⁹ Myers (above, note 3) 85.

Alpha Company did not think about human courage³⁰ and that the realities of war in Vietnam made aspirations towards Homeric or Platonic ideals impossible for most soldiers. O’Brien proves his point by locating one shining exception to his hard-reasoned rule, the “aristocratic” Captain Johansen whom he likens to Hector and who thinks seriously about the meaning of courage.³¹

If Captain Johansen is the single exception who can aspire to Homeric virtue, his successor Captain Smith is the antithesis, an extreme example of the kind of foolish and weak-willed officer that O’Brien also confronted in Vietnam. O’Brien thus sets up two extreme models of “command behavior” and illuminates the contrast between them by using feet and legs thematically. Johansen can approximate Achilles and Hector in his Homeric prowess afoot, and by extension in other idealized patterns of “command behavior.” Smith is not only un-Homeric afoot, but his deficiencies as an officer are characterized by his movements afoot and measured, tragically, in the trauma and suffering he causes to the legs and feet of the men under his command. The men themselves think mainly of survival and how not to let each other down in crucial situations.

Fighting on foot in Vietnam gave soldiers the fullest experience of the kinds of terrors that were absent from Homeric warfare and not as extreme in other modern mechanized theaters of combat: exposure to booby traps and land mines, exposure to the isolation, fatigue and claustrophobic fear of “humping” on long, Sisypheanly pointless patrols through the dense bush and across paddies—walking for miles in water sometimes waist high. The contrast to the combat environment of Homer is conspicuous. Courage and terror and time and space are measured by O’Brien and others who lived and died in the Vietnam war, in their letters home, in narrated oral histories, in poems, short stories and books, *step by step*. Jonathan Shay notes that in WW II and Korea 3-4% of US deaths came from mines and booby traps, but in Vietnam

³⁰ *Combat Zone* (1979), 141. Those interested in O’Brien’s use in *Combat Zone* of ideas about courage derived from Plato’s *Laches* may now read the discussion in W. I. Miller, *The Mystery of Courage* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U Pr, 2000), 29-46.

³¹ There are a number of reasons for O’Brien to have chosen to liken Johansen to Hector, rather than Achilles. Hector embodies the knowing response to existing dangers that lies at the center of the concept of “wise endurance.” He also is constant in his commitment to the safety of the community of soldiers and civilians who depend upon his command and his actions. For Hector’s endurance and speed afoot, cf. such similes as Hector and Paris rushing from the gates of Troy like sailors worn out in their limbs by strenuous rowing, but revitalized and sped along by a tail wind (*Il.* 7.1-7); and Hector pursuing the Achaeans as a dog pursues a boar or lion, relying on *ποσὶν ταχέεσσιν* (*Il.* 8.337-342).

11% of deaths and 17% of injuries came from such devices.³² This totally altered the psychological environment of infantry soldiers and contributed directly to the high incidence of PTSD among Vietnam veterans.

O'Brien devotes an entire chapter of *Combat Zone* entitled "Step Lightly" to the different kinds of hidden explosive devices that could sever toes, detach heels and rip off legs: *Bouncing Betties*, *toe-poppers*, *booby trapped grenades*, the *Soviet TMB*, *Chinese antitank mines*, *directional-fragmentation mines*, the *corrosive-action-car-killer*. He even reckons time in severed limbs.³³

In the three days I spent writing this, mines and men came together three more times. Seven more legs, one more arm.

The Vietnam war went straight for the legs and feet. There is no way of making such random forms of death and maiming noble or glorious—"Homeric" à la Rupert Brooke. Thus this section of *Combat Zone* has but a single allusion to higher literature or cultural myth, an ironic reference to Victor Herbert's *Babes in Toyland*.

The powerful film *Dear America* made by HBO and the Vietnam Veterans' Organization in 1989 and based on the collection of letters compiled by the New York Vietnam Veterans Memorial Commission emphasizes the terrors and dangers that patrolling posed for infantry soldiers by visually tracking their descent on foot into Vietnam's equivalent of the Heart of Darkness. Opening scenes show young soldiers at the outset of the war in 1965 innocently using their legs in various antics, surfing, swimming, playing volleyball, and playing childlike games with their weapons. Suddenly the documentary film images shift to mines, pungee sticks and booby traps; and the viewer then joins a patrol walking through suffocating elephant grass. Here is the voice-over from the letter of Sp/4 George Olsen of the 75th Infantry:

One other impression from that patrol is that anyone over here who walks more than 50 feet through elephant grass should automatically get a Purple Heart. Try to imagine grass 8 to 15 feet high so thick as to cut visibility to one yard, possessing razor-sharp edges. Then try to imagine walking through it while all around you are men possessing the latest automatic weapons who

³² Jonathan Shay (above, note 8) 34-35. Shay notes that "[p]rolonged patrolling in Vietnam led to a decomposition of the normal, the familiar, the safe. . . . In such warfare nothing is what it seems; all certainties liquefy; stable truths turn into their opposites."

³³ *Combat Zone* (1979), 125-130, quoted passage p. 129.

desperately want to kill you. You'd be amazed at how a man can age on one patrol.

The next part of Olsen's written letter, not used in the film, continues with its focus on men and their legs and feet, and how their feet and legs mark their courage:

But as far as being soldiers, we're proud of our outfit and its history, and are definitely among the best troops over here. . . . Men have gone on operations here with broken ankles in order not to let their buddies down. . . . I'm going out now for a run in the sand to toughen my feet up.³⁴

O'Brien dedicates a prose hymn to the left leg that captures the intense concern of foot soldiers for the safety of their legs and feet in such treacherously threatening surroundings.³⁵

We walked along. Forward with the left leg, plant the foot, lock the knee, arch the ankle. Push the leg into the paddy, stiffen the spine. Let the war rest there atop the left leg: the rucksack, the radio, the hand grenades, the magazines of golden bullets, the rifle, the steel helmet, the jingling dogtags, the body's own fat and water and meat, the whole contingent of warring artifacts and flesh. Let it all perch there, rocking on top of the left leg, fastened and tied by latches and zippers and snaps and nylon cord.

Packhorse for the soul. The left leg does it all. Scolded and trained. The left leg stretches with magnificent energy, long muscle. Lumbers ahead. It's the strongest leg, the pivot. The right leg comes along, too, but only a companion. The right leg unfolds, swings out, and the right foot touches the ground for a moment, just quickly enough to keep pace with the left, then it weakens and raises on the soil a pattern of desolation.

Arms move about, taking up the rhythm.

Eyes sweep the rice paddy. Don't walk there, too soft. Not there, dangerous, mines. Step there and there and there, careful, careful, watch. Green ahead. Green lights, go. Eyes roll in the sockets. Protect the legs, no chances, watch for the fuckin' snipers, watch for ambushes and punji pits.

Recall that Achilles, the chief warrior-hero of the epic that defines war in western culture, has a virtually exclusive claim to the epithets "swift-footed," "swift afoot," and "relying on his feet," and that this is what an epic tradition, attuned to the realities of warfare on the ground, wished

³⁴ B. Edelman, ed., *Dear America: Letters Home from Vietnam* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), 50. George Olsen 1969-70 Americal Div. Chu Lai, killed in action March 3, 1970. The men patrolling on broken ankles with their "brothers in arms" echo Owen's (above, note 24) men, many of whom "had lost their boots / But limped on, blood-shod. All went lame. . . ."

³⁵ O'Brien, *Combat Zone* (1973), 26.

to memorialize about him.³⁶ Hector, too, displays agility and speed afoot (above, note 31). Both aristocratic warriors use their prowess afoot in displays of ἀρετή and in successful pursuit of κλέος in battle. Their footspeed is a key element in the climactic confrontation between them in *Iliad* Book 22.³⁷ In Vietnam, however, as O'Brien's use of foot and leg imagery makes clear, this Homeric ideal was virtually unattainable. Footspeed, like noble Homeric or Platonic concepts of courage, is reserved for the rare exception, Captain Johansen. The foot soldiers themselves rarely think of abstractions like courage or public honor, and they use their feet and legs cautiously to "hump it" on patrol and to "step lightly" and warily in hope of self-preservation.

O'Brien tries to come to terms with the way that the Vietnam war wasted feet, legs and lives and to identify the potential for virtuous action amidst such random and pointless carnage. He uses a further Homeric dichotomy between hero and anti-hero that itself rests on the legs and feet of the contrasting infantry officers. O'Brien sets up his comparison between the two extremes Captain Johansen and Captain Smith in ways that directly parallel the contrast between Achilles and Thersites in Homer's *Iliad*. That O'Brien explicitly likens Captain Johansen to Hector and elsewhere uses Achilles as a model for bravery strengthens the novel's Iliadic subtext.³⁸ Thersites is a singular anomaly of anti-aristocratic appearance and action on the plains of Troy, but in Vietnam Captain Smith is an ironically fine example of a familiar type. O'Brien, by implicit analogy to this Homeric contrast, pinpoints the anti-heroic reality of Vietnam, "[s]tripped finally of classical, literary, and Hollywood touchstones."³⁹ Thus O'Brien's point is made. If

³⁶ Even when there is a metrically equivalent epithet, e.g., "great-spirited" (μεγάθυμος) for "swift afoot" (πόδας ὠκύς), Homer prefers to emphasize Achilles' speed and agility.

³⁷ Cf. Dunkle (above, note 4). Their race is prefaced by Apollo disguising himself as Agenor and tricking Achilles into trying to run him down (*Il.* 21.600-22.20). Again it is truly and mythically heroic that they can race three times around the walls of Troy in full battle gear. Achilles is singled out as galloping like a prize-bearing horse over the plain while he λαίψηρά πόδας καὶ γούνατ' ἐνώμα (*Il.* 22.24).

³⁸ The epic is just as much the tragedy of Hector as it is the tragedy of Achilles, and the two heroes, as a composite, face the range of terrible choices and awful responsibilities that war places on exceptional commanders, whether they are fighting as aggressors or defenders. Cf. J. M. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago: U of Chicago Pr, 1975), 69-127.

³⁹ Myers (above, note 3) 86-87, calls Captain Smith, "Hector's antithesis," thereby recognizing the Homeric allusion, but overlooking the underlying analogy to the Homeric dichotomy between Thersites as unheroic and Achilles/Hector as heroic.

warfare is stripped of traditionally defined heroics, common foot soldiers are left without ideal models for proper action, but with an intense appreciation for rare acts of true valor and a grimly ironic sense of connoisseurship for incompetent screw-ups, especially those who waste human lives.

The contrast between Achilles (the supreme courageous warrior) and Thersites (an ugly and undisciplined lesser warrior) is worked out clearly in *Iliad* 2.212-220 where Thersites has his single moment on the epic stage.⁴⁰ We need to discuss here the Thersites episode in the *Iliad* at some length in order to understand how the theme of legs and feet fits into the fuller explicit contrast between hero and anti-hero.

Homer's understanding of the realities of infantry combat helps to explain why he emphasizes the foot speed of Achilles and the contrasting lameness of Thersites as attributes that define their identities. It takes Homer a mere nine hexameter lines to present Thersites vividly to his audience and later readers. The entire self-contained Thersites episode runs a mere 66 lines (*Il.* 2. 212-277). The nine-line introduction of Thersites is followed by his abusive verbal attack upon the conduct and character of Agamemnon. After this speech, Odysseus immediately puts Thersites in his place with an equally sharp and contempt-laden response and threatens physical punishment for any future misconduct. The episode ends when Odysseus administers a beating to Thersites with the royal scepter of the Atreid dynasty of Agamemnon, the quintessential symbol of aristocratic command authority. The gathered troops approve of and laugh at the humiliation of Thersites. His attitudes and actions are thus categorically

⁴⁰ It is debated whether Thersites is actually a rank-and-file soldier or an aberration within the aristocratic warrior elite. W. G. Thalmann, "Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats and Heroic Ideology in the *Iliad*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 118 (1988): 1, argues that "Thersites is evidently a common soldier—the only one individually described in the *Iliad*—and is the absolute antithesis of the handsome, strong and brave 'Homeric Hero'." Thersites' lack of a patronymic is cited in support of his non-aristocratic standing. Yet the brevity of the only scene in which he appears may account for the lack of patronymic. In *Il.* 2.247 Odysseus asserts that Thersites should not try to contend with those who have the title of βασιλεύς. His ugliness certainly stands at odds with aristocratic notions of καλὸς κάγαθός, and it can be argued that this alone places him among the rank and file. Nonetheless we should keep in mind that the description and treatment of Thersites among the βασιλῆες are in many ways analogous to how Hephaestus is described and treated among the gods. Yet we do not for that reason conclude that Hephaestus is not one of the gods. In the *Iliad* Homer concentrates on the exploits and conduct of the elite. It makes sense to view Thersites, whatever his specific rank, as the ugliest—and literally most ignoble—among those warriors who came within Homer's field of vision and the orbit of Achilles and his peers.

rejected by the heroic world of Homer. In O'Brien's Vietnam, officers like Captain Smith are in ready supply.

Θερσίτης δ' ἔτι μῶνος ἀμετροεπής^a ἐκολῶα^b
 ὅς ρ' ἔπεα φρεσὶν ἤσιν ἄκοσμά τε πολλά^c τε ἤδη,
 μάψ, ἀτὰρ οὐ κατὰ κόσμον, ἐριζέμεναι βασιλευσὶν^d,
 ἀλλ' ὅ τι οἱ εἴσαιτο γελοῖον Ἀργείοισιν
 ἔμμεναι^e. αἰσχιστος δὲ ἀνήρ^f ὑπὸ Ἴλιον ἦλθε·
 φολλκός^{A1} ἔην, χωλός δ' ἕτερον πόδα^{A2}. τῷ δέ οἱ ὦμα
 κυρτῶ^{B1}, ἐπὶ στήθος συνοχωκότε^{B2}. αὐτὰρ ὕπερθε
 φοξὸς ἔην κεφαλῆν^C, ψεδνῆ δ' ἐπενήνοθε λάχνη^D.
 ἔχθιστος^g δ' Ἀχιλλῆι μάλιστ' ἦν ἡδ' Ὀδυσῆι.
 (2.212-220)

But one man, Thersites, still railed on^b, nonstop^a.
 His head was full of obscenities^c, teeming with rant,
 all for no good reason, insubordinate, baiting the kings^d—
 anything to provoke some laughter from the troops^e.
 Here was the ugliest man^f who ever came to Troy.
 Bandy-legged^{A1} he was, with one foot clubbed^{A2},
 both shoulders humped together^{B1}, curving over
 his caved-in chest^{B2}, and bobbing above them
 his skull warped to a point^C,
 sprouting clumps of scraggly, woolly hair^D.
 Achilles despised him most^g, Odysseus too—
 (Fagles 2.246-256⁴¹)

Thersites is a grotesque aberration among Homeric warrior-heroes, here represented by Achilles in his physical prowess, valor, commitment to action and spareness of words, and by Odysseus as master of effective and appropriate speech, shrewd intelligence, the cunning plan, and clever implementation of command decisions. Thersites' ways of speaking and reasoning are highlighted, as would be expected in a council scene. His speech is unmeasured (ἀμετροεπής) and uncontrolled. He speaks—actually we are told that he emits the sound of the jackdaw ἐκολῶα—without any sense of structure or proportion (ἄκοσμα) the many words and disconnected thoughts of which his mind is full, always playing to the crowd rather than seriously addressing issues. Odysseus later (2.246) addresses Thersites as ἀκριτόμυθε or “one who has no powers of discrimination in speech.” We understand that Thersites is the master of cheap irony and the

⁴¹ R. Fagles, trans., Homer, *The Iliad* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 106.

cheap laugh (saying whatever he thought would provoke laughter from the Argive troops). He challenges authority without being capable of proposing effective alternatives (baiting the kings insubordinately and in violation of good order). The pitch of his voice even grates on the ears like the jackdaw's shrill cry (ἐκολῶα).

But notice the care Homer takes in depicting Thersites physically. He walks with a dragging limp (φολλκός) and is lame in one foot (χωλός δ' ἕτερον πόδα). These are the first words used to describe him (A1 and A2). Then Homer moves his oral poetic camera up Thersites' body in a panning shot. Thersites is droop-shouldered (B1) and weak-chested (B2), and his head is pointy (C) and covered with sparse, coarse, patchy hair (D). For these qualities, Thersites is the ugliest (αἰσχιστος) man at Troy—the word αἰσχιστος has both moral and physical implications. Thersites is most hateful (ἔχθιστος) to Achilles and Odysseus who themselves are the “best of the Achaeans.” Odysseus (2.248) later says that no other mortal is χειρότερον “worse” (a form that is a comparative of a comparative) than Thersites.

We meet a like anti-aristocratic composite of physical deformity, intellectual incontinence, inappropriate wit and logorrhea in O'Brien's company in Vietnam, and like Thersites he is placed in direct contrast to an Achilles figure. He is the new captain of O'Brien's unit, and his first action as a leader involves planting his two legs, which he will subsequently use only in grotesquely anti-heroic ways.⁴²

We watched Johansen salute and shake hands with our new commander, a short, fat ROTC officer.

The new captain looked like a grown-up Spanky of “Our Gang.”

Like seventy percent of the officers around, he was from the South, a Tennessean named Smith. He planted his legs and gave us a pep talk. He wanted a good, tough fighting unit. He wanted professionals, he said, just as the battalion motto called for in big gold letters. He tried to sound authoritative, but it did not work. No one trusts a green officer, and if he's short and fat and thinks he's a good soldier, he had better be Patton himself.

With Smith leading Alpha Company, we returned to the My Lai-My Khe area. It was a two-day operation, simply a sweep through a string of villages. . . .

Helicopters ferried us into a paddy to the north of one of the villages at My Khe. Smith's face was red. He yelled at everyone, and nobody listened. He told us to spread out, watch the tree line. . . .

Then he smiled like a jolly fat man and said he always wanted to be a soldier. “My daddy used to say, Bobby, stay away from women and hard liquor. Join the army, my daddy said. Join the army and stay with it, and

⁴² The following Captain Smith excerpts come from O'Brien, *Combat Zone* (1979), 148-161.

you'll live to be a hundred. But, by cracker, those guys better keep their eyes open. Intel says this is a bad place."

... Captain Smith sat by the radio. "Pretty good strategy, huh, Timmy boy? ROTC's pretty good trainin', not so bad as they say. Hee, hee. Actually, to tell the truth now, it is pretty bad trainin'. Should've gone to the Point, I guess, but oh well, Daddy always said, start at the bottom. Hee, hee. An' ROTC's the bottom."

Soon Smith has his men moving with a troop of armored personnel carriers or "tracks." As the foot soldiers enter a rice paddy marsh with mud up to their thighs, they climb onto the tracks and haphazardly disarm. They are shelled by rocket-propelled grenades and scramble off the tracks in disordered panic, becoming mired in the deep muck, while reaching desperately for helmets and rifles and ammo belts. In the increasing chaos the tracks use a standard defensive maneuver, they go into reverse.

They ran us over. There was no way to move, as in a nightmare when your legs are filled with concrete and not attached by nerves to your brain.⁴³

The tracks ran over Paige, taking away his foot. One of the lieutenants was hit, but he went to pull Paige out of the mud. Ortez was cushioned by the muck when a track went over him, but his leg was broken. He went stumbling past me, bloody and without his helmet or machine gun. He threw his canteen away, and his ammo belt. He stopped and turned and hopped away from the track, crying.

A track ran over a little guy named McElhaney. He couldn't move because he carried a radio, and he was smothered and crushed dead. . . .

The tracks stopped in front of us.

Smith walked over and said he wanted to call headquarters and get an air strike on the village. He wiped off his glasses and chuckled. . . .

Then the tracks formed a straight line and moved out. We walked between and behind the monsters, looking for McElhaney. The mud came up to our knees, and the water was sometimes near the crotch, and we strutted like Fourth of July majorettes. But the steps were horrible to take. No one really wanted to be the man to find Mac. Captain Smith lagged behind. . . .

Up front somebody found McElhaney under two feet of water.

Most of the blood was out of him. He was little to begin with. . . .

Captain Smith joined us. He joked, he didn't smoke, he didn't help with McElhaney, and he asked what we thought about all this.

"Sir, I think we should just turn the tracks around and get away from these villages. That's my advice, sir."

⁴³ Cf. the apparent allusion here to the famous dream image in the Homeric scene of Achilles pursuing Hector (*Il.* 22.199-202):

ὡς δ' ἐν ὄνειρῳ οὐ δύναται φεύγοντα διώκειν·
οὔτ' ἄρ' ὁ τὸν δύναται ὑποφεύγειν οὔδ' ὁ διώκειν·
ὡς ὁ τὸν οὐ δύνατο μάρψαι ποσίν, οὔδ' ὅς ἀλύξαι.
πῶς δέ κεν Ἐκτωρ κήρας ὑπεξέφυγεν θανάτοιο. . . .

"Well, Timmy boy, that's why I'm an officer. We've got our orders."

"Okay, sir. But if the ground commander thinks it's best to . . ."

Captain Smith jerked a finger into the air and did a comic double-take, acting, and he smiled like a fool, acting. "Right, Timmy boy. I almost forgot that. Maybe I'll talk to the track commander about yer idea. Thanks, Timmy boy."

... Captain Smith ambled over and sat down on the dike. "Got me a little scratch from that mine. Here, take a look. Got myself a Purple Heart." He showed me a hole in his shirt. It looked like a moth had done it, that small.

Smith and the track commander argue about strategy and reach an impasse. Smith's platoon leaders will simply not jeopardize their men again by going along with the track commanders.

... When the platoon leaders sulked and delayed, Smith waddled over to the command track and continued the argument. In ten minutes he waded back and told us to get aboard. The track commander was tired of arguing, it was late in the day, and everyone was in a hurry to eat hot chow. We turned our backs on the village and rode away.

After this disaster, Captain Smith tried to regain his leadership, but the lieutenants gracefully avoided him. He was openly ridiculed by the men. There was half-serious talk about his being a marked man.

The gruesome farce of Smith's command continues. At night he opens fire upon movement on the perimeter and "in the morning we kicked a dead pig." He sends out a patrol to inspect the base of the hill on which he encamps, ignores a subsequent explosion, and waits for one of the men to burst back upon them, bleeding and sobbing that "two of the men were dead, and one lost his leg, and the others couldn't move." Near the end of July, again at night and while encamped in a Buddhist monastery, men throw grenades at perceived movement, ignite a Claymore mine, and blow bits of stone from the belly of a statue of Buddha. "During the first days of August, Captain Smith was relieved of his command of Alpha Company."

O'Brien then offers us what the overall design, scale and scope of the *Iliad* preclude Homer from giving us, a month in the career of Thersites in command. Thersites in Vietnam is Thersitean: short, fat and waddling, a grown-up version of a comic child movie star, red in a face all too often creased with the irritating smile of an artificially jolly fat man. Just as in the *Iliad*, O'Brien's Thersites is characterized quickly and efficiently as a physical anti-hero. As with the Homeric Thersites, we learn straightway that Captain Smith is an inept speaker, affecting an authoritative voice that carries no authority. In both introductions to character, the mere name presence of the contrasting figure of the real hero—here Johansen simply shakes hands with Smith as command is

changed—is enough to place a sharper accent on the deficiencies of the false or anti-hero.⁴⁴ A month with O'Brien in Alpha Company under Smith reveals a man who is garrulous, trivial, self-referential, and given to a self-defensive humor that is pathologically obtuse about the human suffering his own failings as a captain have caused. In short he is offensive in physical appearance, ἀμετροεπής (undisciplined as a speaker), ἀκριτόμυθος (lacking in any discernment), and strives for whatever is γελοῖον (an easy laugh), regardless of the circumstances. He is eventually shunned by his subordinate officers and openly ridiculed by his men, a condition in which Odysseus' verbal and physical abuse leaves Thersites.

Captain Johansen, as we have mentioned, is Achilles and Hector at once. Like Achilles throughout most of the *Iliad*, he is a hero apart, separated from others by what O'Brien calls "a deadfall canyon of character and temperament." Like both Hector and Achilles, he clearly grasps what fate and circumstances require of his courage at any given moment, especially in the potentially ultimate moment. He is direct, controlled, and authoritative in his speech. O'Brien notes Johansen's disciplined aristocratic bearing, West Point, not ROTC. He is physically beautiful. Like Achilles and his peers, Johansen strives "constantly to excel," the defining virtue of an epic hero.⁴⁵ Like Hector and Achilles, who recognize their fates in advance and go to meet them head on, Johansen sees what has to be done and does it.

Johansen was separated from his soldiers by a deadfall canyon of character and temperament. They were there and he was here. He was quite alone, resting against his poncho and pack, his face at rest, his eyes relaxed against the coming of dark. He had no companions. . . .

"I'd rather be brave," he suddenly said to me. "I'd rather be brave than almost anything. How does that strike you?"

"It's nothing to laugh at, sir."

. . . A month before, on a blistering day, Johansen had charged a Viet Cong soldier. He'd killed him at chest-to-chest range, more or less, first throwing a grenade, then running flat out across a paddy, up to the Viet Cong's ditch, then shooting him to death. With the steady, blood-headed

⁴⁴ For the 1979 edition, O'Brien intentionally altered his text here in order to make Johansen the officer who shakes hands with Smith. In the original 1973 version, Johansen says a few brief words, and a soldier named Anderson shakes Smith's hand. Compare *Combat Zone* (1973), 142, and *Combat Zone* (1979), 148.

⁴⁵ Cf. S. Schein, *The Mortal Hero* (Berkeley: U California Pr, 1984), 80, for a succinct discussion of the notion of ἀριστεία and the meaning of the verb ἀριστεύειν in the *Iliad*. ἀριστεύειν means something like "to be (or try to be) best and bravest in battle."

intensity of Sir Lancelot, Captain Johansen was brave. It was strange he thought about it at all. . . .

I thought about courage off and on for the rest of my tour in Vietnam. When I compared subsequent company commanders to Johansen, it was clear that he alone cared enough about being brave to think about it and try to do it. . . .

But losing him was like the Trojans losing Hector. . . .

Captain Johansen was one of the nation's pride. He was blond, meticulously fair, brave, tall, blue-eyed and an officer.⁴⁶

Johansen's defining act of bravery is "running flat out across a paddy, up to the Viet Cong's ditch" and shooting his enemy at close range—after resolving consciously to do what he was doing. Such a display of speed and valor is singular in O'Brien's memoir/novel. The motif of speed and agility afoot (and its opposite) is the key physical element in the analogy between Achilles-Thersites and Johansen-Smith. As we have seen, Achilles' distinguishing epithets in the *Iliad* focus on his mobility and reliance upon his feet. In addition, Achilles' swiftness of foot is stressed in other key contexts, such as *Iliad* 22.229-230, where his elemental *might* (βίη) is linked twice with his swiftness in tracking down Hector as they run around the walls of Troy.

Recall that Homer, in describing (2.217-220) Thersites' anti-Achillean physical appearance, had us see first and foremost the deformity of his legs and feet: "he walked with a dragging limp and was club-footed" (φολλὸς ἔην, χωλὸς δ' ἕτερον πόδα). These defects place Thersites at the other end of the heroic physical spectrum from Achilles. The remaining description of Thersites' body, of course, simply reinforces, as we have already noted, that he is the complete opposite of the hero who is "best of the Achaeans" in both his appearance and in the skills required of warriors at Troy.

Nor can Thersites in Vietnam match the heroic prowess afoot of Achilles. Captain Johansen in his defining moment of courage races "flat out across a paddy." Captain Smith's very first gesture towards his new company was "plant[ing] his legs" and giving a pep talk. We are certainly to understand from the absurdity of the pep talk that the pose he struck with his legs was likewise ridiculous.

O'Brien's account of Alpha Company's entire month with Captain Smith is filled with vivid anti-Homeric descriptions and poetic images of how the infantrymen and their leader moved or suffered afoot. We have the nightmarish horror of legs "filled with concrete and not attached by nerves to your brain." The men churn in the mud in trying to escape the moving personnel carriers. Paige smokes while on

⁴⁶ O'Brien, *Combat Zone* (1973), 128-142 = *Combat Zone* (1979), 134-148.

morphine to cover the pain of his severed foot. The men, in mud up to their knees and with water sometimes reaching their crotches, "strutted like Fourth of July majorettes." A medic "stumbled across the exposed paddy, running with high, fullback strides." Even a critically wounded seventy-year-old Vietnamese woman "scrambled like a wet fish."

Amidst all this intense trauma to legs and feet, amidst desperate churning, strutting, stumbling, and scrambling upon concrete-filled legs, Captain Smith "sat by the radio," "walked over," "lagged behind," "ambled over and sat down," and "waddled over and continued the argument." It is obscenely ironic that Smith "waddles over" to argue with the track commanders about whether his men *will have to walk three miles over potentially mined terrain* or can sit and ride in relative safety atop the personnel carriers. Indeed Captain Smith is the antithesis of Hector and Achilles, and O'Brien's clever thematic use of feet and legs drives home the contrast.

In *Combat Zone*, O'Brien links himself firmly to Homeric tradition⁴⁷ by giving us straight the horrors of war, by drawing explicit comparisons and contrasts to the Homeric heroes Hector and Achilles, and by manipulating images that remind us that for soldiers who fight on the ground, danger and courage are still measured by what they do with their legs and feet. But O'Brien uses Homeric images and themes in order to accentuate how anti-heroic conditions and behaviors are for most soldiers in Vietnam. O'Brien's is a simple reading of Homer equivalent to his straight take on Horace's *dulce et decorum est* (above, note 27). He refers to the noblest and ignoblest warriors in Homer and ignores the many variations of aristocratic behavior in between. In Vietnam O'Brien's primary concern is the rank and file whose own "virtuous behavior" mostly operates within a narrow band somewhere on the spectrum between Achilles, Hector and Johansen on the one end and Smith and Thersites on the other. The experience of these common foot soldiers is not illuminated directly by the Homeric examples. Yet Homer has explanatory power for O'Brien in identifying the extreme poles. The ordinary soldier is afraid of being like Smith and longs to be like Johansen, but in combat he forgets about such concerns and just wants to stay alive.

In the *Iliad*, heroic warrior leaders, demonstrating ἀρετή and pursuing κλέος, sprint like hounds, charge like prize-winning horses, and rush like sturdy oarsmen with strong winds at their backs. In O'Brien's *Combat Zone*, the race has few meaningful prizes beyond personal survival; and it goes not to the swift, but to those who churn and

⁴⁷ And the tradition of realistic ironists like Owen and Fussell.

stumble and step lightly and luckily enough to stay alive. Tim O'Brien tests the idealized notions of physical prowess and abstract concepts of personal courage and nobility of action that he brought to Vietnam from the works of Homer and Plato and from popular myths. When he discovers that they do not apply, he no longer makes use of them in his later works. The war in Vietnam has revealed itself *step by step* to O'Brien as a world unto itself with its own complex rules of conduct and its own necessary ways of moving through a threatening and treacherous landscape. In Tim O'Brien's Vietnam:⁴⁸

You add things up. . . . [S]ome stories of valor are true; dead bodies are heavy, and it's better not to touch them; fear is paralysis, but it is better to be afraid than to move out to die, all limbs functioning and heart thumping and charging and having your chest torn open for all the work; you have to pick the times not to be afraid, but when you are afraid you must hide it to save respect and reputation. You learned that old men had lives of their own and that they valued them enough to try not to lose them; anyone can die in a war if he tries.

These are the truths common foot soldiers in Vietnam and in comparable modern combat situations carry with them. And so they are wise to endure and to step lightly.

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⁴⁸ From the last two pages of *Combat Zone* (1973), 198-199.