



If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home

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Tim O'Brien returned from Vietnam with a Purple Heart and six other medals; but he also came home with something more. That something more is in this book. Over time, Tim O'Brien has used both art and artifice to shape his fictional accounts of Vietnam. Award-winning novels such as *Going After Cacciato* and *The Things They Carried* offer up a surreal view of the war. O'Brien's first account of the war, however, was written in the raw, unfiltered months following his return from Southeast Asia in 1969. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* has all of the eloquence and attention to language and detail that are a mark of the author's work; what is different about it is its straightforward, unembellished depiction of his personal experience of hell. O'Brien paints an unvarnished portrait of the infantry soldier's life that is at once mundane and terrifying--the endless days of patrolling punctuated by firefights that end as suddenly and inconclusively as they begin; the mind-numbing brutality of burned villages and trampled rice patties; the terror of tunnels, minefields, and the ever-present threat of death. Powerful as these scenes are, perhaps the most memorable chapter in the book concerns his decision to desert just a few weeks before he was sent to Vietnam. "The AWOL bag was ready to go, but I wasn't.... I burned the letters to my family. I read the others and burned them, too. It was over. I simply couldn't bring myself to flee. Family, the home town, friends, history, tradition, fear, confusion, exile: I could not run." Tim O'Brien went into the war opposing it and came out knowing exactly why. *If I Die in a Combat Zone* is more than just a memoir of a disastrous war; it is also a meditation on heroism and cowardice, on the mutability of truth and morality in a war zone and, most of all, on the simple, human capacity to endure the unendurable. From the *Minneapolis Tribune*, "One of the best... disturbing... powerful!"

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