

Leadership Lessons

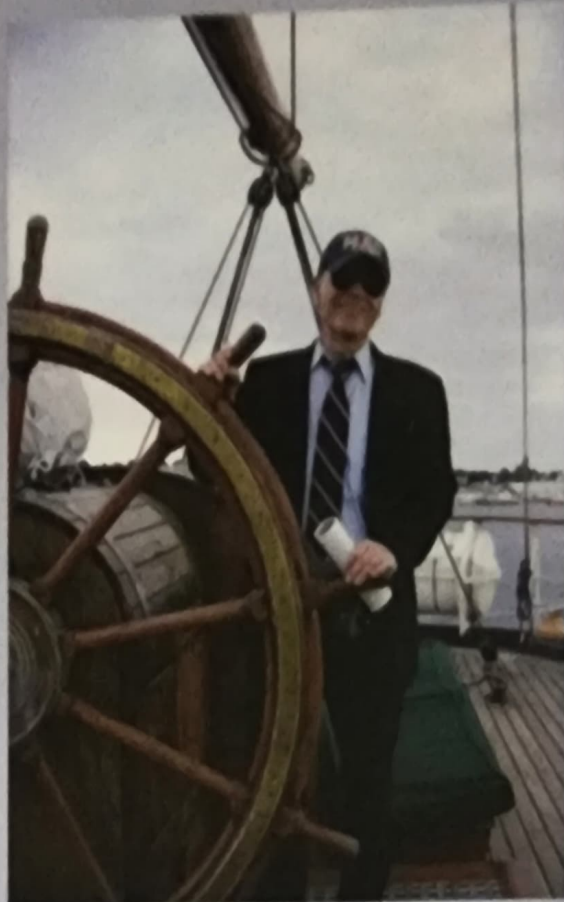
through

Storytelling

by Karen Wink,
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Tim O'Brien, acclaimed author of war literature and Vietnam veteran, visited the Academy recently. And he told the truth about surviving Vietnam, writing fiction, living contradictions, and overcoming adversity. Ironically, O'Brien spoke sincerely about his experiences yet said, "I am paid to lie; I make things up for a living" (lecture). He was, of course, referring to fiction, and in a sudden moment of recognizing the contradiction, he gave a wry smile and advised cadets to keep their honor. Capturing ironies are classic in the writings of O'Brien who is "recognized as the preeminent American novelist of the Vietnam experience [whose] novels have gained widespread critical and significant popular success because of their ability to translate the experience of wartime into perspectives on the largest questions of life and death" (Lopez). O'Brien came to the Academy as part of the leadership lecture series for a full day: He led discussions in Dr. Karen Wink's 4/c composition classes, lunched with Admiral Burhoe and other administrators, toured Eagle docked in New London, conducted a creative-writing workshop, lectured to the corps, and signed copies of his books. All of these dynamic activities left cadets, faculty, and administrators alike impressed by O'Brien's unique ability to inspire leadership through highly-imaginative storytelling.

Co-sponsored by the Department of Humanities and the Leadership Institute, O'Brien participated in the lecture series to highlight a vital aspect of cadet and officer duty: leadership. His first, most famous work of fiction, *The Things They Carried* (1998), reveals Alpha Company soldiers facing crises of leadership with no "absolutes," no easy answers. For instance, Lt. Cross is conflicted about his place in Vietnam and, as a coping mechanism, he is preoccupied with a girl from his hometown, thus metaphorically departing from his platoon at the time his subordinate, Ted Lavender, is killed by sniper fire. 4/c cadets had read this story in their composition classes and debated the degree to which a leader is responsible for his/her people in chaotic circumstances. With full awareness that cadets will face leadership challenges as cadre, ensigns, and beyond, the book prompted their thinking about ambiguity and courage in spite of it. Referencing his work, O'Brien admitted "a lot was made up, yet grew out of real time" because he wants readers to think about truth and the genuine experience of war. He



Author Tim O'Brien on Eagle, of which he took a tour.

avoids tying up stories with morals, arguing in his work, "A true war story is never moral" (68). When a cadet asked him why the chronology is scrambled in *Things*, he said "time collapsed in war and lostness was a state of mind." Clearly, he wanted to document the real, fragmented memory and thought, thus offering cadets and other readers a candid look inside soldiers' minds to identify with them.

During class discussions, O'Brien described his journey as a writer. With the influence of his journalist father and second-grade teacher mother who read often, O'Brien wanted to create stories from a young age. It was not until he was drafted in Vietnam (against his wishes until "the conscience of his community got to him," he admits) that his military experience intersected with his desire to write, and the result was *The Things They Carried* followed by seven other books, among them including: *Going After Cacciato* and *In the Lake of the Woods*. His goal

of writing is to "make readers feel what's there and to bob in the boat with him" while simultaneously trying to "make words graceful." He enjoys fiction because he is not limited to reality and can reflect on "what could've, what should've happened, to look at the world as it is not." O'Brien is imagination at work. When a cadet asked him if he writes with a plan, O'Brien said he has no certain outcome in mind and writes the way we read without knowing what will happen next. His words motivated cadets to write. After the discussion, 4/c Melissa Gilday said, "He makes me want to pick up a pen and write."

During his creative writing workshop, sponsored also by *id est*, CGA's literary journal, O'Brien provided ordinary advice extraordinarily to twenty rapt cadets (4/c-1/c). His advice was as follows: (1) pay attention to the sound of one's own voice to develop the best style of speech; (2) practice simultaneity, that is, never allowing just one thing to happen at the same time; (3) turn on the television in stories; allow readers "to see" the action through visual language; (4) start in the real world, then extend reality by "looking into happeningness," what might have happened; (5) allow the reader "built-in choices"; and (6) introduce an element of mystery to keep readers involved. O'Brien argues, "Too much bad writing tries to explain things away; instead, keep the level of mystery involved to mirror real life where things are not tidied up too neatly." He reminded cadets of the value of stories and persuaded them to keep journals because their military lives are rich with material—the kind that writers have to imagine and research. He challenged the cadets to complete a short writing exercise to become someone different than themselves (ex. an immigrant) and write a scenario of their thoughts and feelings. Several cadets have accepted the challenge and consulted

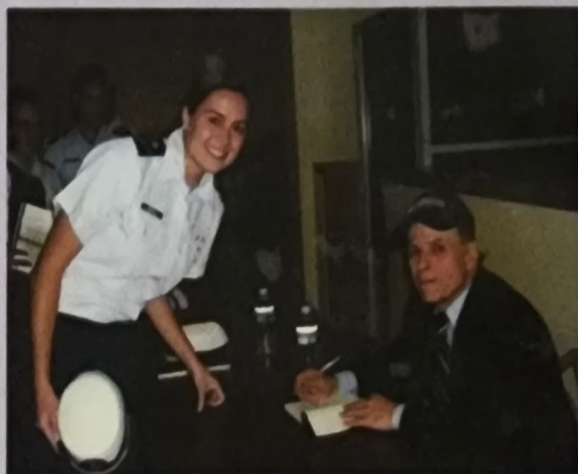
Dr. Wink about their words.

During his lecture to a packed audience in Leamy Hall, O'Brien said he would discuss leadership by "doing what [he] does best: tell stories." He looked the audience in the eyes and said he aims "at the tearducts, back of your throat, your sad bone, and your funny bone" in his writing. He said a good book should read like a good movie. Claiming if he explained his state-of-mind during the summer he was drafted as, "'I played golf and worried' would make a boring story." Instead, readers are gifted with his brilliant *Things* vignette of "On the Rainy River" in which his central character with his namesake flees to the Tip-Top Lodge in northern Minnesota--just shy of the Canadian border--where he meets a knowing, quiet proprietor named Elroy Berdahl. After spending one week at the lodge, "O'Brien" decides he will reservedly accept the draft notice, but keep his honor.

O'Brien, as if following his own advice to cadets, described how Vietnam stories and the ability to write them later essentially saved his life from a place where "time came in little droplets of now." With everything turned upside down in war, contradictions existed. From a Methodist upbringing in which he learned the commandment: "Thou Shall Not Kill" was now in Vietnam where "you better kill...what was good in Worthington, Minnesota was not true in Vietnam," he explained. When "so many fell silent," he later wrote to cope, to simply extract feelings from his psyche and onto paper so "things were not as heavy as before." In Vietnam, he began to obsess about needing to mobilize under extreme physical and emotional

demands on his platoon; therefore, he focused upon his physicality, his legs, hands moving and carrying, carrying and moving...

The Vietnam War was so influential to O'Brien's writing that the naïve man with reservations about combat, a self-described hater of boy scouts and bugs, became the wise man now known as one of the most celebrated writers about Vietnam soldiers. As it is important to steer clear of thinking about soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan as statistics, O'Brien's soldiers were bona fide individuals within platoons. O'Brien has brought these soldiers back to life. He also told a very moving story about his father to whom he wished he had said, "I love you" prior to his death. With storytelling, O'Brien explains,



3/c Lauren Binger with O'Brien at book signing

we can "will people back to life"; for example, bring his father back in his dreams when he forgives him for not saying the sentimental words in real time.

Telling other stories about Huge Thompson, Jr. who flew a helicopter over Mai La and was later "celebrated for his deeds of raw courage" and a blind Vietnamese man who would throw water over hot, sweating soldiers, and the foolish act of one comrade throwing a milk carton at the man's eye who, remarkably, did not cease assisting the soldiers. They were complicit and, to this day,

O'Brien said, "Sometimes I forgive myself; sometimes I don't." He advised the cadets to "do better than I did," and in his most emphatic moment when he seemed to see the future of cadets in his mind's eye, said, "Say *No* to acts of injustice and immorality—the greatest challenging facing leading men and women." Look to role models who "comport themselves with calm and dignity" and follow their lead honorably.

After the lecture, 3/c Travis Christy reflected on Mr. O'Brien's words and said he "seemed to carry with him a humble, yet powerful, charisma that made him one of the most memorable speakers at the Academy. His inspiring message of leadership challenged cadets to make the right decisions even in the most precarious of circumstances. Through the medium of his fiction, Mr. O'Brien showed the Corps that even when actions might be unpopular, or when peers avert their eyes from the problem at hand, a just and effective leader will never be coerced into inaction. With the duality that his trademark style suggests, this talented author, clad in a suit and baseball cap, was essentially discussing the foundational values of leadership in a manner that oscillated between light-hearted storytelling and the somber conveyance of moral wisdom. When the event finally drew to its end, even the expansive setting of Leamy Auditorium could not prevent his address from taking on an intimate tone that left the



1/c Emily Kehrt and 1/c Charlie Sinks flank O'Brien at the creative-writing workshop (they are co-editors of *id est*, CGA's literary journal).

Coast Guard Academy both impressed and enlightened by his presence."

During the booksigning, 4/c Chris Martin expressed to O'Brien, "I just want to thank you for the only 'A' I got on a paper in senior English class. It's much easier to write about something that interests you."

At the end of the night, another cadet asked O'Brien if he had any regrets. He said it was not really possible to

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