From Philip Caputo's *A Rumor of War*:

For Americans who did not come of age in the early sixties, it may be hard to grasp what those years were like—the pride and over-powering self-assurance that prevailed. Most of the thirty-five hundred men in our [Marine] brigade [in 1965], born during or immediately after World War II, were shaped by that era, the age of Kennedy's Camelot. We went overseas full of illusions, for which the intoxicating atmosphere of those years was as much to blame as our youth.

War is always attractive to young men who know nothing about it, but we had also been seduced into uniform by Kennedy's challenge to "ask what you can do for your country" and by missionary idealism he had awakened in us. American was omnipotent then; the country could still claim it had never lost a war, and we believed we were ordained to play cop to the Communists' robber and spread our own political faith around the world. . . . So, when we marched into the rice paddies on that damp March afternoon [as the first American combat troops in Vietnam], we carried, along with our packs and rifles, the implicit convictions that the Viet Cong would be beaten and that we were doing something altogether noble and good. We kept the packs and rifles; the convictions we lost.

The discovery that the men we had scorned as peasant guerrillas were, in fact, a lethal, deadly enemy and the casualty lists that lengthened each week with nothing to show for the blood being spilled broke our early confidence. By autumn, what had begun as an adventurous expedition had turned into an exhaust-ing, indecisive war of attrition in which we fought for no cause other than our own survival.

. . . [T]here were no Normandies or Gettysburgs for us, no epic clashes that decided the fates of armies or nations. The war was mostly a matter of enduring weeks of expectant waiting and, at random intervals, of conducting vicious manhunts through jungles and swamps where snipers harassed us constantly and booby traps cut us down one by one.

The tedium was occasionally relieved by a large-scale search-and-destroy operation, but the exhilaration of riding the lead helicopter into a landing zone was usually followed by more of the same hot walking, with the mud sucking at our boots and the sun thudding against our helmets while an invisible enemy shot at us from distant tree lines. . . . [When the enemy did confront us] weeks of bottled-up tensions would be re-leased in a few minutes of orgiastic violence, men screaming and shouting obscenities above the explosion of grenades and the rapid, rippling bursts of automatic rifles.

Beyond adding a few more corpses to the weekly body count, none of these encounters achieved anything. . . . Most of all, we learned about death at an age when it is common to think of oneself as immortal. Everyone loses that illusion eventually, but in civilian life it is lost in installments over the years. We lost it all at once and, in the span of months, passed from boyhood through manhood to a premature middle age. . . . We left Vietnam peculiar creatures, with young shoulders that bore rather old heads.

[After the war we realized] how different we were from everyone who had not shared with us the miseries of the monsoon, the exhausting patrols, the fear of a combat assault on a hot landing zone. We had very little in common with them. Though we were civilians again, the civilian world seemed alien. . . .

Anyone who fought in Vietnam, if he is honest about himself, will have to admit he enjoyed the compelling attractiveness of combat. . . . 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 sense quickened . . . . And it could be just as addictive [as drugs], for it made whatever else life offered in the way of delights or torments seem pedestrian.

[There was a] communion between men . . . as profound as any between lovers. Actually, it is more so. . . . It is, unlike marriage, a bond that cannot be broken by word, by boredom or divorce, or by anything other than death. Two friends of mine died trying to save the corpses of their men from the battlefield. Such devotion, simple and selfless, the sentiment of belonging to each other, was the only decent thing we found in a conflict otherwise notable for its monstrosities. . . .

There is also the aspect of the Vietnam War that distinguished it from other American conflicts—its absolute savagery. I mean the savagery that prompted so many American fighting men—the good, solid kids from Iowa farms—to kill civilians and prisoners. . . . [W]ar, by its nature, can arouse psychopathic violence in men of seemingly normal impulses. . . .

The evil was inherent not in the men—except in the sense that a devil dwells in us all—but in the circumstances under which they had to live and fight. The conflict in Vietnam combined the two most bitter forms of warfare, civil war and revolution, to which was added the ferocity of jungle war. . . . The marines in our brigade were not innately cruel, but on landing at Danang they learned rather quickly that Vietnam was not a place where a man could expect much mercy if, say, he was taken prisoner. And men who do not expect to receive mercy eventually lose their inclination to grant it.

At times, the comradeship that was the war's only redeeming quality caused some of its worst crimes—acts of retribution for friends who had been killed [or injured]. Some men could not withstand the stress of guerrilla-fighting: the hair-trigger alertness constantly demanded of them, the feeling that the enemy was everywhere, the inability to distinguish civilians from combatants created emotional pressures which built to such a point that a trivial provocation could make these men explode . . . .

Others were made pitiless by an overpowering greed for survival. Self-preservation . . . can turn a man into a coward or, as was more often the case in Vietnam, into a creature who destroys without hesitation or remorse whatever poses even a potential threat to his life. . . .

General [William] Westmoreland's strategy of attrition also had an important effect on our behavior. Our mission was not to win terrain or seize positions, but simply to kill: to kill Communists and to kill as many of them as possible. Stack 'em like cordwood. Victory was a high body-count, defeat a low kill-ratio, war a matter of arithmetic [which led to such views as] . . . "if it's dead and Vietnamese, it's VC" . . . .

Finally, there were the conditions imposed by the climate and country. . . . The sun scorched us in the dry season, and in the monsoon season we were pounded numb by ceaseless rain. Our days were spent hacking through mountainous jungles whose immensity reduced us to an antlike pettiness. At night we squatted in muddy holes, picked off leeches that sucked on our veins, and waited for an attack to come rushing at us from the blackness beyond the perimeter wire.

. . . As for the United States, we did not call it "the World" for nothing; it might was well have been on another planet. . . . [In Vietnam] lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state. The descent could be checked only by the net of a man'' inner moral values, the attribute that is called character. There were a few—and I suspect Lieutenant Calley [who was prosecuted for the My Lai killings] was one—who had no net and plunged all the way down, discovering the their bottommost depths a capacity for malice they probably never suspected was there.