**“Reporting Casualties”**

*By Philip Caputo*

*Philip Caputo, a young officer in the U.S. Marine Corps, was stationed in South Vietnam from March 1965 to July 1966. When he returned home, he wrote A Rumor of War, a prize winning memoir which described his experiences in the Vietnam War. In the following selection from this book, Caputo describes his assignment as assistant adjutant at a regimental headquarters.*

As fighting increased, the additional duty of casualty reporting officer kept me busiest. It was also a job that gave me a lot of bad dreams, through it had the beneficial effect of ***cauterizing*** whatever silly, abstract, romantic ideas I still had about war.

My job was simply to report on casualties, enemy as well as our own; casualties due to hostile action and those due to non-hostile causes – the accidents that inevitably occur where there are large numbers of young men armed with lethal weapons or at the controls of complicated machinery. Artillery shells sometimes fell on friendly troops, tanks ran over people, helicopters crashed, marines shot other marines by mistake.

All reports had to be written in that clinical, ***euphemistic*** language the military prefers to simple English. If, say, a marine had been shot through the guts, I had to say “GSW” (gunshot wound) “through and through, abdomen. Shrapnel wounds were called “multiple fragment lacerations,” and the phrase for ***dismemberment*** was “traumatic amputation.” I had to use it a lot when the Viet Cong began to employ high explosive weapons and booby traps. A device they used frequently was the command detonated mine, which was set off electrically from ambush. The mines were packed with hundreds of steel pellets and a few pounds of an explosive called C-4. The gas expansion rate of C-4 is 26,000 feet per second. That terrific force, and the hundreds of steel pellets propelled by it, made the explosion of the command detonated mine equivalent to the simultaneous firing of seventy twelve gauge shotguns loaded with double-O buckshot. Naturally, anyone hit by such a weapon was likely to suffer the “traumatic amputation” of something – an arm, a leg, his head – and many did. After I saw some of the victims, I began to question the accuracy of the phrase. *Traumatic* was precise, for losing a limb is definitely traumatic, but *amputation*, it seemed to me, suggested a surgical operation. I observed, however, that the human body does not break apart cleanly in an explosion. It tends to shatter into irregular and often unrecognizable pieces, so “traumatic fragmentation” would have been a more accurate term and would have preserved the euphemistic tone the military favored.

It was a rare phenomenon, but some marines had been so badly mangled there seemed to be no words to describe what had happened to them. Sometime that year, Lt. Colonel Meyers, one of the regiment’s battalion commanders, stepped on a booby-trapped 155-mm shell. They did not find enough of him to fill a willy-peter bag. In effect, Colonel Meyers had been disintegrated, but the official report read something like “traumatic amputation, both feet; traumatic amputation, both legs and arms; multiple lacerations to abdomen; through and through fragment wounds, head and chest.” Then came the notation “killed in action.”

Sometimes I had to verify the body counts. Field commanders occasionally gave in to the temptation to exaggerate the number of Viet Cong their units had killed. So the bodies were brought to headquarters whenever possible, and I counted them to make sure there were as many as been reported. That was always pleasant because the corpses had begun to decompose by the time they reached headquarters. ***Decomposition*** sets in quickly in that climate. Most pleasant of all was the job of identifying our own dead. The battalion adjutants usually did that, but whenever there was confusion about the names of the dead or when the descriptions of their wounds were incorrectly reported to the regiment, I had to do it. The dead were kept in a fly tent adjacent to the division hospital. They were laid out on canvas stretchers, covered with ponchos or with rubber body bags, yellow casualty tags tied to their boots – or to their shirts, if their legs had been blown off. One of the simplest ways to identify a dead man was to match his face against his photograph in a service record book. Some of them did not have faces, in which case we used dental records, since teeth are almost as reliable a means of identification as fingerprints. The latter were used only when the casualty had been ***decapitated*** or his jaw shattered to bits.

The interesting thing was how the dead looked so much alike. Black men, white men, yellow men, they all looked remarkably the same. Their skin had a tallow like texture, making them appear like wax dummies of themselves; the pupils of their eyes were a washed out gray, and their mouths were opened wide, as if death had caught them in the middle of a scream.

They smelled the same, too. The stench of death is unique, probably the most offensive on earth, and once you smelled it, you can never again believe with conviction that man is the highest being in earthly creation. The corpses I have had to smell as a soldier and war correspondent smelled much worse than all the fish, birds, and deer I have scaled, skinned, or gutted as a sportsman. Because the odor of death is so strong, you can never get used to it, as you can get used to the sight of death. And the odor is always the same. It might vary in intensity, depending on the state of decomposition, but if two people have been dead for the same length of time and under the same conditions, there will be no difference in the way they smell. I first made that observation in Vietnam in 1965, when I noticed that the stench of a dead American made me just as sick as that of a dead Vietnamese. Since then, I have made it again and again in other wars in other places, on the Golan Heights and in the Sinai Desert, in Cyprus and Lebanon, and, coming full circle back to Vietnam, in the streets of Xuan Loc, a city much fought over during the North Vietnamese offensives in 1975. All those dead people, Americans, North and South Vietnamese, Arabs and Israelis, Turks and Greeks, Moslems and Christians, men women, and children, officer and enlisted, smelling equally bad.

*Adapted from “A Rumor of War” (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977).*