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Tim O'Brien, *If I die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1973)

Major Callicles looked like an ex-light-heavyweight champ. He had a head like a flattened 105 round, a thick brown neck, bristling stalks of hair, bloodshot eyes, a disdain for pansies. He was the battalion executive officer – second in command. He bragged that he'd started out as a NCO, thrived on the discipline, and gone on to become an officer, avoiding West Point and doing it the hard way.

Barrel-chested – staves and beer and all – he was a last but defiant champion of single-mingled, hard-boiled militarism. He listed his hates in precise order – moustaches, prostitution, pot, and sideburns. And since all four were either tacitly or explicitly permitted in Vietnam, he harboured a necessarily silent hate for the new, insidious liberality infecting his army.

Moustaches, while authorized by new regulations, were quickly outlawed. It was rumoured he carried a dull and bloody razor, that he used it on even a wisp of overnight hair.

Next was prostitution. It was an all-consuming outrage. A whorehouse flourished at the very foot of LZ Gator, the battalion fire base, and he muttered he would get rid of it.

He pursued pot and sideburns like an FBI agent; he prosecuted violators with the ruthless zeal of Julius Caesar.

'Guts', he would mutter. 'This army really needs guts. GI Joe's turned into a pansy. O'Brien, you show me a soldier with guts, and you can have this job.' He hunched his shoulders, stood stiff-legged, he held a cigarette like a pencil, and turned to look at you out of one eye, scowling and squinting.

Three months after Major Callicles took charge, *Time* and *Newsweek* and every other scrap of paper blowing into Vietnam heralded the My Lai massacre.

The massacre happened in March 1968. That was one year after I'd arrived in Vietnam; over a year and a half before Callicles took over the executive officer's job; long before our battalion had taken over the Pinkville—My Lai area of operations from Lieutenant Calley's Eleventh Brigade. But Major Callicles stuffed the burden of My Lai into his own soul. He lost sleep. He lost interest in pot and prostitutes, and his thick, brown face became lined with red veins haemorrhaging with the pain of My Lai. Like the best defence attorney, he assumed the burden of defending and justifying and denying – all in one broad, contradictory stroke.

At first, he blamed the press: 'Christ, those rags – you don't really believe that crap? Jesus, wake up, O'Brien! You got to learn the economics of this thing. These goddamn slick rags got to sell their crap, right? So they just add together the two big things in this hippie culture: people like scandals and people hate the military, not knowing what's good for them. It's knee jerk. So they look around and choose My Lai 4 – hell, it happened over a year ago, it's dead – and they crank up their yellow journalism machine; they sell a million *Times* and *Newsweeks* and the advertisers kick in and the army's the loser – everybody else is salivating and collecting dollars.'

