Thin Red Line Quotes

“Nobody really was what he pretended to be. It was as if everyone made up a fiction story about himself, and then he just pretended to everybody else that’s what he was. And everybody believed him, or at least accepted his fiction story. “ (Page 14)

“It was strange, but it was as if when you were honest and admitted you didn’t really know what you really were, or even if you were anything at all, then nobody liked you and you made eveyone uncomfortable and they didn’t want to be around you. But when you made up your fiction story about yourself, and what a great guy you were and then pretended that that was really you, everybody accepted it and believed you.” (Page 14)

“When he said coward, what he meant to say was that Fife had not yet learned –if he ever would- that his life, and himself, his He, didn’t mean a goddamned thing to the world in general, and never would. Whereas Doll was too dumb to understand such a concept, or even be able to conceive of such an incredible idea. Fife was smart enough to know it, or at least learn it, but he wouldn’t let himself admit it. And in Welsh’s dictionary, that was the worst kind of coward there was.” (Page 25)

“The main thought uppermost in Fife’s mind was that everything was so organised, and handled with matter-of-fact dispatch. Like a business. Like a regular business. And yet at the bottom of it was blood: blood, mutilation, and death.” (Page 37)

“The very idea, and what it implied, struck a cold blade of terror into Fife’s essentially defenceless vitals, a terror both of unimportance, his unimportance, and powerlessness: his powerlessness. He had no control or sayso in any of it. Not even where it concerned himself, who was also a part of it. It was terrifying.” (Page 41)

“...one faint, but clearly discernible scream, high and shrill, which did not actually reach them until after the geyser had gone up, was heard by the men on shore, cut off and immediately followed by the sound wave of the explosion: someone, nameless man’s single and ineffectual protest against the taking of his life and his own bad luck at being where he was instead of somewhere else, ridiculous, pointless, but not without a certain dignity, although, ironically, it was not heard or appreciated, until after he himself no longer existed. His last scream lived longer than he did.” (Page 42)

“There was a peculiar tone of sexual excitement, sexual morbidity, in all their voices- almost as if they were voyeurs watching a man in the act of coitus; as though they were looking openly on the evidence of this unknown man’s pain and fear they were unwillingly perhaps but nonetheless uncontrollably seducing him.” (Page 66)

“Each man, each time he tried to imagine his own death; tried to conjure up the experience of the bullet keyholing through his own lung; found himself being tricked by his own mind. The only thing he was able to picture was the heroic, brave gesture he would make when dying.” (Page 70)

“At the same time somewhere in the back of each mind, like a fingernail picking uncontrollably at a scabby sore, was the small voice saying: but is it worth it? Is it really worth it to die, to be dead, just to prove to everybody you’re not a coward?” (Page 70)

“There was no fighting that smell. It was as different in kind and texture and taste from the earlier one as two smells could be. The earlier one had been mild, was greenish bronze in colour, acrid, dry, only slightly unpleasant. The second smell was wet and yellow white. It was not mild. No man who was sane and at liberty to leave was going to stay around and smell it.” (Page 78)

“Doll also found out he could convince everybody he had not been afraid. It all went back to that thing he had learned in his fight with Corporal Jenks. You acted out your fiction story and everyone accepted it. Thus he could laugh and josh about the raids, pretending he had been scared, yes, but not really terrified. And whether or not it was true or not didn’t matter. Doll was almost as glad to learn this as he was to prove he was invulnerable.” (Page 93)

“The marchers needed every spark of concentration simply to keep going. Any thoughts beyond that remained their own. After an hour’s marching even such private thoughts became displaced. The infantry forgot where it was going in the urgent immediate problem of getting there, of keeping going without dropping out.” (Page 114)

“He was so furiously angry it blurred his eyes until he feared he would trip and fall down and lie there and howl senselessly. He hated them, all of them. You break your ass trying to look after them, be a father to them. And all they do is hate you for it, and for being an officer, with a hard, ignorant, stubborn endurance.” (Page 117)

“It was always a shock to rediscover how much enlisted men hated you, because you tended to try to forget it. And tomorrow he would be taking them in. He felt very inadequate. Especially when he recalled how badly the march had gone today. He had been horrified and shocked by what had happened.” (Page 120)

“When compared to the fact he may well be dead by this time tomorrow, whether he was courageous or not today was pointless, empty. When compared to the fact that he might be dead tomorrow, everything was pointless. Life was pointless. Whether he looked at a tree or not was pointless. It just didn’t make any difference. It was pointless to the tree, it was pointless to every man in his outfit, it was pointless to everyone in the whole world. Who cared? It was not only pointless to him; and when he was dead, when he ceased to exist, it would be pointless to him too. More important: not only would it *be* pointless, it would *have been* pointless all along.” (Page 121)

“Nothing they heard or saw on the way up prepared them for the pandemonium they entered when they came over the crest. Climbing with the wind behind them they heard no battle noises; then, suddenly, they found themselves immersed in infernal noise and tumult. Like a river running into a swamp and dissipating its current, the line of files trudged over the crest and disappeared in a mob of running or standing, shouting and talking men who struggled to make themselves heard above the din.” (Page 135)

“Young Corporal Fife’s reaction on the other hand (though he had not said a single word) was one of fear, disbelief and finally a massive horror (as he enviously watched these others) that any creatures who spokes a language, walked upright on two legs dressed in clothes, built cities and claimed to be human beings could actually treat each other with such fiendish animal cruelty.” (Page 157)

“But some time before any of this happened, young Pfc Bead had killed his first Japanese, the first Japanese to be killed by his company, or for that matter by his battalion. It was, Bead reflected about it later, when indeed he was able to reflect about it all, which was not for some time, typical of his whole life; of his stupid incompetence, his foolish idiocy, his gross mismanagement of everything he put his hands on; so that whatever he did, done so badly and in such ugly style, gave no satisfaction,: action without honour, travail without grace,. A man of a different temperament might have found it funny; Bead could not laugh. At just about 5 o’clock he had to take a crap.” (Page 168)

“...he yelled and leaped to his feet motioning the platoon forward. He took two steps, the platoon with their bayonets fixed since early morning right behind him, and fell down dead, stitched diagonally from hip to shoulder by bullets, one of which exploded his heart. He had just time enough to think that something had hurt him terribly, not even enough to think that he was dead, before he was. Perhaps he screamed.” (Page 190-191)

“It was a horrifying vision: all of them doing the same identical thing, all of them powerless to stop it, all of them devoutly and proudly believing themselves to be free individuals. It expanded to include the scores of nations, the millions of men, doing the same on thousands of hilltops across the world. And it didn’t stop there. It went on. It was the concept-concept? the fact; the reality-of the modern state in action. It was so horrible a picture that Stein could not support it or accept it.” (Page 223)

“At some unspecified moment between this time yesterday and this time today the unsought realisation had come to Bell that statistically, mathematically, arithmetically, any way you wanted to count it, he John Bell could not possibly live through this war. He could not possibly go home to his wife Marty Bell. So it did not really make any difference what Marty did, whether she stepped out on him or not, because he would not be there to accuse her.” (Page 238)

“The screaming seemed to splinter the air, a huge circular saw splitting giant oak slabs, shivering spinal columns to fragments.” (Page 248)

“This was war? There was no superior test of strength here, no superb swordsmanship, no bellowing Viking heroism, no expert marksmanship. This was only numbers. He was being killed for numbers. Why oh why had he not found and taken to himself that clerkish deskjob far in the rear which he could have had.” (Page 260-261)

“John Bell stopped and stared, transfixed by the revelation. And the revelation, brought on by his old memory, and which he was forced to face, was that his volunteering, his climb out into the trough that first time, even his participation in the failed assault, all were-in some way he could not fully understand-sexual, and as sexual, and in much the same way, as his childhood incident of the gravel road.” (Page 285)

“Could it be that with the others? Could it be that *all* war was basically sexual? Not just in psych theory, but in fact, actually and emotionally? A sort of sexual perversion? Or a complex series of sexual perversions? That would make a funny thesis and God help the race.” (Page 286)