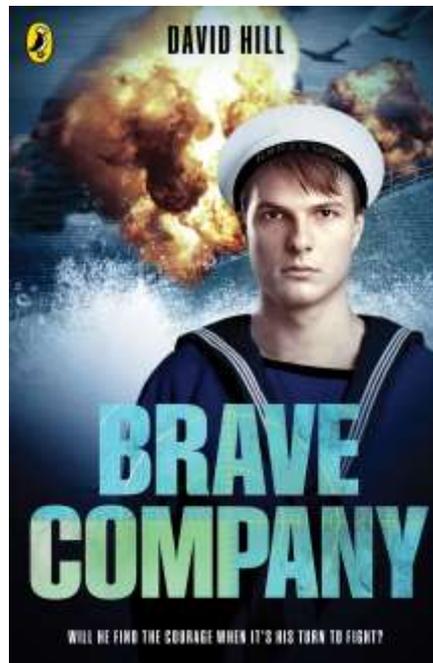


Teachers notes for

BRAVE COMPANY

By David Hill



PUFFIN BOOKS

For the teacher

Brave Company by David Hill is set in 1951 and follows Russell Purchas, a sixteen-year-old boy seaman on the New Zealand Navy frigate *Taupo* as it takes part in the Korean war as part of the United Nations forces supporting South Korea.

Russell is excited to be sailing to Korea, but he's also apprehensive about what will happen when he's really in a war-zone. Can he prove he's got the courage that's needed? His Uncle Trevor was a decorated war hero in World War II, but Russell knows the shameful truth – that his uncle was a deserter. Russell's worst fear is ending up like him.

The realities of war are not what Russell is expecting and his ideas, both of war and of bravery will be challenged.

This is fast-paced and action-packed reading but also a thoughtful study of the confusions and ambiguities of war and who its heroes are. David Hill writes a well-researched and gripping novel about one of New Zealand's lesser-known military engagements.

Introductory Exercises

- Look at the book cover. What do you think the book is about and when and where do you think it might be set?
- **Research:** Find out when and why the Korean War took place. Why was New Zealand involved?

Close Reading

Chapter one

1. *Brave Company* opens with a gun-training scene, but we don't learn that it is a practice and not a real battle until page 12. Why do you think the author chose to open the novel like this? What sort of impact does it have on a reader?
2. How long has Russell been on board HMNZS *Taupo*?
3. What does Russell *not* enjoy so much about being in the navy?
4. Read pages 15–16. In your own words, summarise what happened in Korea between June 1950, when the war began, and June 1951, when the book is set? Why is the New Zealand Navy taking part in the war?
5. Choose four naval words you do not recognise in this chapter and write down what you think they mean, then look them up in the book's glossary.

Chapters two–three

1. What description does the author give of O'Brien's physical appearance?
2. How would you describe Russell's attitude to refugees? (pages 20–26)
3. What made Russell decide to join the navy? (26–29)
4. On page 34 Russell meets a young Japanese girl badly scarred by the Hiroshima bombing of 1945. What else do we learn about this in chapter three?
5. Read pages 37–38 from 'Bells woke him . . .' to ' . . . one weird thing after another.' What sort of mood or atmosphere do you think the author creates here? What role do verbs play in creating this?

Chapters four–six

1. Why does Russell miss his report to Commander Yates? (page 44) What is a drop-short and what damage does the one Russell sees do?
2. What does Russell see in the wreckage of the boat? (pages 50–51) Do you think his attitude to refugees begins to change after this?
3. What signs of war damage does David Hill describe in chapter six? Think of how people's lives have been affected as well as damage to property and structures.

Chapters seven–ten

1. Why do you think the young Korean boy steals Russell's blanket? In your opinion did Russell react well to this? Give reasons for your answer.
2. What does PO Ralston say to Russell on page 88? Find another example of humorous dialogue in the book. Why do you think an author would include humour in a book that has such serious themes?
3. How does *Taupo* end up stranded on the sandbank?

4. How does the author use sound in chapter ten? Find examples of onomatopoeia and of where sounds and silences are described. Why do you think the writer focuses so much on sound in this chapter?

Chapters eleven–thirteen

1. How does Russell look back on his fear during the bombardment? How do the members of *Taupo*'s crew try to make him feel better?
2. How does the incident in chapter twelve, when four North Korean soldiers are rescued from the sea, differ from the other engagements with the enemy Russell has so far experienced? Do you think war is a different experience when soldiers from both sides see each other rather than launching shells from a distance?
3. Where does Russell go when he is on leave in Kure? Why do you think he returns here?
4. How many ships form the convoy sailing from Kure to Korea (pages 130–131)? What nations are they from? What type of ships are they?

Chapters fourteen–seventeen

1. What do you think O'Brien means on page 139 when he says that the Korean civilians are on 'Their own side'?
2. What do we learn about Sa-In in chapter fifteen? What do we learn about his family, his personality, his relationship with his sister? Find examples from the text to illustrate your points.
3. What does Russell learn about Trevor's actions in World War II (page 156–158).
4. Why did Trevor desert the army? (159–161) Can you think of other examples when disobeying authority might be the right thing to do?

Chapters eighteen–twenty

1. Read chapter eighteen from page 173 and look for examples of how David Hill describes the experience of being in an artillery bombardment. In particular look for examples of how he describes the experience affecting the five senses: touch, hearing, sight, sound, smell. Do you think he creates a convincing battle scene? Why or why not?
2. Read the paragraph on page 179–180 that begins, 'They charged towards the valley bottom . . .' Identify the similes and metaphors in this passage. Do you think they are effective in describing the human wave? Why/why not?
3. How does Sa-In hide Russell and Sergeant Barnett from the communist soldiers?
4. *Brave Company* is told in the third-person limited (or singular) voice. This means that a narrator conveys the events of the story by focusing on the experiences and thoughts of the protagonist or main character. Because of this, when Russell is hiding under the canvas tarpaulin in chapter 20, we only know what is happening based on what he can hear or feel. Describe what is happening to Sa-In in the trench. What techniques does the author use to make sure we know this? Why do you think an author would choose to write in the third-person limited point of view?

Chapters twenty-one–twenty-two

1. What does Russell mean when he thinks, 'I found my person again – my real person. I know who my uncle was now'? (page 206)
2. Why is Russell so ambivalent about being piped aboard *Taupo*? (208–209)
3. Do you like the way the novel ends? Why or why not? Do you think it is a good resolution for the book?

Discussion and Debate

- Russell's Uncle Trevor was a public war hero and Russell was deeply ashamed to find out about his desertion from the army. *Brave Company* has many examples of heroism and heroes. Do you think society needs heroes? Why? Who are heroic figures in New Zealand culture? Why do you think the reaction is often so negative when a public hero or role model is found to have done something perceived as wrong?
- During the novel Russell's opinion of the Korean refugees changes dramatically. Why do you think this happens? What examples of prejudice can you think of in our own society and how much of this do you think is the result of ignorance?
- Being the main character makes Russell the protagonist or 'hero' of *Brave Company*. But the most heroic act in the novel is carried out by Sa-In while Russell hides. Why do you think the author chose to write the story this way? What theme or idea do you think this conveys?

Character

Do you think Russell Purchas changes as a character during *Brave Company*? Why or why not? Write down your reasons and find examples from the text to support your argument. Can you think of a novel you have read where a character undergoes significant change during the course of the book? Do you think all good stories require that the characters change?

Why/why not?

Creative Writing

- Sa-In only describes briefly what happens to his home and his parents. You write the full story. What happened the night his parents went missing? Where did Sa-In and Yong Mee go? How did they survive? How did they end up living near the New Zealand artillery battalion?
- Imagine that you are an investigative journalist. Your assignment is to find out the truth about how Lieutenant Trevor MacKenzie died. Write your findings in an article.
- Write a short story on one of the following themes:
 - Mistaken courage
 - The middle of the battle
 - The thief
 - On board the ship

History

The Korean War is one of many overseas conflicts New Zealand has fought in. Find out about one war we have sent troops overseas to. Why did New Zealand participate in this conflict? How many troops did we send? What were conditions like for soldiers? Report your findings to the class. You might choose:

- The Boer War
- World War I
- World War II
- The Korean War
- The Vietnam War
- Afghanistan