

The Things They Carried

Tim O'Brien

Title

The title of this short story is also the title of the novel, of which this short story is the first chapter. It has four short words which convey both the physical, tangible items the soldiers carried with them through Vietnam, and also the psychological, emotional, intangible weights they bore. O'Brien's short story and novel are recognised as one of the first significant descriptions of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD); until his writing, little had been published which acknowledged this condition. It went a long way to assisting people, not only soldiers, who suffer the effects of having experienced or witnessed a traumatic event or situation which caused intense fear, helplessness, horror and/or physical injury.

Word	Part of speech	Meaning and Connotations
The	Definite article	What the soldiers carried were definite items which must be acknowledged as loads and burdens.
Things	Plural noun	These are both physical, tangible items and psychological, emotional, intangible weights.
They	Third person plural pronoun	The use of this general pronoun recognises that PTSD is suffered by many, not only by those of a particular group.
Carried	Verb, past tense	This suggests that the soldiers lifted (or humped) the tangible and intangible weights in the past. It refers to their time in Vietnam, and also indicates that while PTSD is long lasting, its effects can be reduced so that its daily effects are negligible and as if they are in the past.

Some quotes from the short story which demonstrate the psychological burdens are:

"They carried all they could bear, and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried."

"the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight"

"They shared the weight of memory."

"for all the ambiguities of Vietnam, all the mysteries and unknowns, there was at least the single abiding certainty that they would never be at a loss for things to carry"

"By and large they carried these things inside, maintaining the masks of composure."

Structure of the short story

The beginning paragraph narrates First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross' fantasy with Martha, a girl he knew in America. The ending of the short story narrates his realisation about the tragic result of his preoccupation with Martha, his personal growth as a leader of soldiers, and his new, more participatory leadership style.

Between the start and finish, there are sections which cover the physical and psychological weights the soldiers carried. These are interrupted by other sections, including one which has a definition of the verb "to hump" and further narration of Cross' preoccupation with Martha, and other narratives of Cross and Martha.

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity.

What they carried was partly a function of rank, partly of field specialty.

In addition to the three standard weapons ... they carried whatever presented itself, or whatever seemed appropriate as a means of killing or staying alive.

What they carried varied by mission.

They things they carried were determined to some extent by superstition.

They carried USO stationery and pencils and pens.

For the most part they carried themselves with poise, a kind of dignity.

They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die.

Woven throughout the structure are foreshadowing of the death of Ted Lavender and the narration of his death.

Characters of Significance

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross

Ted Lavender

Kiowa

Norman Bowker