

Psychological,  
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Most authors who write about war stories write vividly; this is the same with Tim O'Brien as he describes the lives of the soldiers by using his own experiences as knowledge. In his short story "The Things They Carried" he skillfully reveals realistic scenes that portray psychological, physical and mental burdens carried by every soldier. He illustrates these burdens by discussing the weights that the soldiers carry, their psychological stress and the mental stress they have to undergo as each of them endure the harshness and ambiguity of the Vietnam War.

One question we have to ask ourselves is if the three kinds of burdens carried by the soldier's are equal in size? "As if in slow motion, frame by frame, the world would take on the old logic-absolute silence, then the wind, then sunlight, then voices. It was the burden of being alive" (81). This quote illustrates how these three burdens, when combined, could cause immense pressure on the soldiers, and one has to ask how the soldiers manage to cope with the pressure.

An example of this pressure is according to the 1990 Veteran's administration report one in every three Vietnam veterans suffer from post traumatic stress; this includes thirty percent of soldiers who went to Vietnam, or nearly one million troops, who succumbed to post-traumatic stress. Unlike physical burdens that can be eliminated in various ways, psychological and mental burdens cannot be rid of so easily and so in turn outweigh the physical burdens as well as take their toll on the soldier. The physical burdens that the soldiers carry are huge; however some of the weight can be lost or overcome if necessary.

O'Brien uses three methods to emphasize the physical weight and burdens carried by each soldier. He first describes the standard operation procedure of items each soldier had to carry. The standard weight sums up to an average of sixty six pounds. However, each soldier carries items according to his rank or duties. For example as an RTO Mitchell Sanders carries a PRC-25 radio. Lieutenant Cross seems to be the one who carries the least amount of physical weight; he carries a compass, maps, codebooks, binoculars and a .45-caliber pistol that weighed nearly three pounds.

Dobbins the biggest man carries the M-60 machine gun that ways twenty three pounds and additionally he carries fifteen pounds of ammunition draped across his upper body. The soldiers also carry dead bodies when necessary, for example they carry Lavender's body across to the field to wait for the helicopter " He was dead weight" (71). The term used by the soldiers to carry something was " hump" which symbolizes an obstacle. " In it's transitive form, to hump meant to walk, or to march, but it implied burdens far beyond the intransitive" (69).

To comfort themselves they carried items such as canned peaches, toothbrush, tranquilizers, diary, condoms and an old hunting hatchet. When the men discarded some of the weight, they knew of only two ways. The first is by throwing away weight while on marches. " They would often discard things along the route of the march" (71), the soldiers would do this because they knew that helicopters would always come with fresh supplies. The second method is to die on the field. " Go limp and tumble to the ground and let the muscles unwind and not speak and not budge... " (81).

Mental problems are burdensome for the soldiers, since these burdens cannot be extinguished. When soldiers are at war they are surrounded by responsibility, death and destruction. Adding to all this the harsh conditions and climate do not help. The mental weight can be the responsibility of each soldier. Cross being the leader of the platoon had the most amount of responsibility on his shoulders and yet he was the most distracted one of the lot. An example of his carelessness is his letting the soldiers smoke dope, another is allowing the men to drop essential supplies along the route and acting more like a comrade than a leader.

Other men had responsibilities as well, Dobbins the machine gunner, Mitchell Sanders the RTO and Rat Kiley the medic. He is mentally burdened by his jealousy. He is being jealous when he had no right to, and this just makes him more distracted and as a result endangers the lives of his men more. The killing and destroying of villages and animals are signs of the consequences of the mental burdens and the mental state of the soldiers. Lavender's death affects every soldier mentally to the extent that some would just keep talking about how he fell dead in a flash. Everything seemed worse than it actually was.

The climate and weather conditions in Vietnam were harsh and acted as a topping to the soldiers' mental burdens. Many soldiers were not volunteers for the war but have been drafted. This would mean that they were not necessarily ready for war; "Afterward, when the firing ended, they would blink and peek up. They would touch their bodies, feeling shame, then quickly hiding it." (79). The sound imagery of the firing and screaming describes the mental breakdown of some of the soldiers. Psychological <https://assignbuster.com/psychological-physical-and-mental-burdens-of-the-troops-in-the-things-they-carried-essay/>

burdens are perhaps the result of the effects of the other burdens, and they are the worst.

The emotional stress felt by soldiers is due to many factors, most of which are either from war events, from memories of the past or from objects that have some form of meaning to the soldier. One psychological weight carried by the soldiers is memory. " they shared the burden of memory" (76).

O'Brien notes, some memories keep resurfacing. O'Brien uses imagery to describe grotesque memories. An example is the cutting off of an enemy boy's thumb, which he describes in depth. Fear and guilt are part of the consequences of these events. When Lavender is shot a huge weight is put on the soldiers and they try methods of not showing it.

They were afraid of dying but they were even more afraid to show it... they used hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness" (80). " It was not courage exactly.... Rather they were too frightened to be cowards" (81). In order to overcome their psychological burdens a great inner strength is required and sadly this inner strength comes soon after the loss of Lavender. This event also becomes a point of realization for Cross who begins to feel pure guilt. Before this, Cross's objects with meaning include Martha's letters, Martha's pictures and the pebble Martha gave Cross.

These are destroyed by the end of the story. The initiative to get rid of them takes inner strength but once gotten rid of a huge psychological burden is lifted from his shoulders; he is able to focus and come to reality. " It was a bright morning in mid April. Lieutenant Cross felt the pain. He blamed himself" (71) " He felt shame. He hated himself. He had loved Martha more

than his men and as a consequence Lavender was now dead, and this was something that he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war. "(78).

The fear, guilt and the memories are very heavy burdens on the soldiers and one could say that they could never be rid of it. In conclusion it can be said that the soldiers can let go of the physical weight but cannot run away from the psychological and mental weights. " They carried all the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, longing - these were intangibles, but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight" (81). Thus one can conclude that physical, psychological and mental burdens were not equal in magnitude and that mental and psychological burdens outweighed the physical ones.