

# Free essay about physical items as emotional scars in the things they carried

[Countries](#), [Vietnam](#)



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Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* reads much like a list of physical items that the men of the Alpha Company carried during a tour in the Vietnam War, but at closer examination the short story is about much more than physical items. *The Things They Carried* blends fiction and non-fiction to detail the items American soldiers carried with them as they fight for their country - physical and emotional.

Each member of the platoon carries something specific to their own state of mentality, physicality or beliefs. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carries the memory of his long lost love Martha with him along with hard copy reminders of her, including letters and a pebble. Henry Dobbins carries with him extra food due to his large size. Ted Lavender carries with him items to calm his body and mind, including marijuana and various tranquilizers. Kiowa is the most religious of the group and carries with him the New Testament.

While the items listed above are individually carried by each member of the platoon, they also each carry with them items that unite them as a whole; these items are universal to men of wartime and serve as a reminder to the audience that O'Brien's authorship is loosely based on his own time in the Vietnam War. The purpose of including these items in the narrative is to unite the characters and to convey the idea that while each member carries emotional and physical weight from the war, they can collectively share these items, thus lessening the emotional and physical burdens.

These universal items include the physical such as ponchos, M-16 rifles and ammunition, along with the emotional such as the memory of their loved ones left behind, the weight of the American people back home, the dusty

soil they carry on their backs as they trek through the Vietnam landscape, and the ridicule they face both home and away for participating in the war in the first place.

It is only through death that the characters of the narrative seem to be able to let go of the physical and emotional items they have been carrying. The most emotional death in the story is Kiowa's, the aforementioned religious man of the platoon. O'Brien chose to tell the story in a flashback rather than real time, perhaps to preserve some of the emotional severity of the incident, and perhaps to preserve some of his own sanity after the war. It is only when O'Brien agrees to tell the story of Kiowa's death that he is able to process the traumatic event and the guilt and horror surrounding it, therefore giving further meaning to the things O'Brien carried and had been carrying since Vietnam

The Things They Carried uses physical items to convey the emotional scars of each member of the Alpha Company as well as other men who fought in the Vietnam War. At no time during the narrative is O'Brien hesitant to explicitly describe the gruesome scenes to the audience, only intensifying the physical and emotional scars (items) of the young men. That author draws from his personal experiences in the war to create a setting in which the audience feels engrossed in each character's items because they can sense the emotional trauma it connects to. Towards the end of the narrative, O'Brien states that the way soldiers keep their fallen comrades alive is by telling stories about them, which is exactly what he has been doing throughout the entire narrative, only exposing their physical and emotional scars along the way to humanize the characters even more.

O'Brien concludes the narrative by stating that stories have the power to save people, and it is in this final declaration that he comes full circle with the theme of *The Things They Carried*; while the men of Alpha Company suffered horrific incidents during the Vietnam War, they each carried with them their own story, and it was these stories that allowed them to thrive as individuals during the war. It was these stories that they carried with themselves as they fought on Vietnam soil and it was these stories that O'Brien then carried with himself years after the war was over.