

The things they
carried essay



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“ The Things They Carried” “ The Things They Carried”, by Tim O’Brien, is a story about the things that 12 soldiers carried with them, while fighting in the Vietnam War. From the beginning of the story, the reader can tell that the physical load that the soldiers carried was extreme. What is not so obvious is the emotional load that comes along with war.

The greatest weight a soldier bears comes from nothing they can physically carry, but from their thoughts and emotions. Grief, fear, love, and longing are all burdens on a soldier. It is these things that weigh a soldier down. O’Brien begins the story by describing the items that the soldiers carried.

The war dictated some of the items as “ necessities”. The soldiers also carried personal items that gave them a sense of home. These tangible items varied depending on the soldier. The job or rank of the soldier dictated the amount of necessities that they carried. Because Lieutenant Cross was the leader, he was not responsible for carrying the heavy items, such as the M-60 machine gun. He carried the lighter items, such as the maps and compasses, but also carried the heavy responsibility of keeping his soldiers safe. Sometimes the fears that the soldiers had would also play into what was carried. Scared Ted Lavender carried tranquilizers and “ six or seven ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity.

” (p596) O’Brien is very precise in his description of the tangible items that the soldiers carried. However, his writing becomes much more expressive when he is describing the intangible items. A great deal of emotional weight is added by the thoughts and raw emotions of the soldiers. These are the things that cannot be weighed in pounds. Each soldier carried with them a

false toughness on the outside and emotional baggage on the inside. They were portrayed as brave and courageous, yet they seemed deadened to the fact that they could die at any moment.

“ They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. It wasn’t cruelty, just stage presence. They were actors.

” (p604) On the inside, the soldiers felt the burden of fear. “ They were afraid of dying but they were even more afraid to show it. ” (p604) If they were seen as weak or cowardly, this would expose a vulnerability to both the enemy and fellow soldiers. So, they kept up the charade while they secretly dreamed of the “ freedom bird”.

In reality, this was the plane that evacuated the wounded. But to them, it was their escape from the realities of war. “ At night, not quite dreaming, they gave themselves over to lightness, they were carried, they were purely borne.

”(p605) It was their hope, that the freedom bird would someday take them away and return them to their innocence. They would be born once again. The intangible items that Lieutenant Cross carried with him were pictures and letters from Martha, his love interest from back home. To him, she represented a world of peace.

His thoughts and fantasies of her brought him to his “ better place”.

Unfortunately, these fantasies also kept him from staying focused on the task at hand. He realized this too late, and blamed himself when Lavender died. “ He had loved Martha more than his men, and as a consequence

Lavender was now dead, and this was something he would have to carry like a stone in his stomach for the rest of the war. " (p602) Lieutenant Cross would have to mold himself into a hardened leader. He needed to " remind himself that his obligation was not to be loved but to lead. (p607) The soldiers in " The Things They Carried" carried many things with them on their march.

All of the things they carried were a large burden to them, but none more so than their emotions. All of the men carried with them fears, desires, and memories. These are the intangible objects that will forever be a part of them, for they are the greatest weight that a soldier bears. Works Cited O'Brien, Tim. " The Things They Carried. " Literature. Ed.

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