PASSAGE: *THE THINGS THEY CARRIED*

# LITERARY NARRATIVE: Adapted from the novel *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien (©1990 by Tim O’Brien)

The things they carried were largely determined by necessity. Among the necessities or near-necessities

were P-38 can openers, pocket knives, heat tabs, wristwatches, dog tags, mosquito repellent, chewing

gum, candy, cigarettes, salt tablets, packets of Kool-Aid, lighters, matches, sewing kits, Military Payment

Certificates, C rations, and two or three canteens of water. Together, these items weighed between 15

and 20 pounds, depending upon a man's habits or rate of metabolism. Henry Dobbins, who was a big

man, carried extra rations; he was especially fond of canned peaches in heavy syrup over pound cake.

Dave Jensen, who practiced field hygiene, carried a toothbrush, dental floss, and several hotel-sized bars

of soap he'd stolen on R&R in Sydney, Australia. Ted Lavender, who was scared, carried tranquilizers

until he was shot in the head outside the village of Than Khe in mid-April. By necessity, and because it

was SOP, they all carried steel helmets that weighed 5 pounds including the liner and camouflage cover.

They carried the standard fatigue jackets and trousers. Very few carried underwear. On their feet they

carried jungle boots—2.1 pounds—and Dave Jensen carried three pairs of socks and a can of Dr. Scholl's

foot powder as a precaution against trench foot.

Norman Bowker carried a diary. Rat Kiley carried comic books. Kiowa, a devout Baptist, carried an

illustrated New Testament that had been presented to him by his father, who taught Sunday school in

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. As a hedge against bad times, however, Kiowa also carried his grandmother's

distrust of the white man, his grandfather's old hunting hatchet.

Necessity dictated. Because the land was mined and booby-trapped, it was SOP for each man to carry a

steel-centered, nylon-covered flak jacket, which weighed 6.7 pounds, but which on hot days seemed

much heavier. Because you could die so quickly, each man carried at least one large compress bandage,

usually in the helmet band for easy access. Because the nights were cold, and because the monsoons

were wet, each carried a green plastic poncho that could be used as a raincoat or groundsheet or

makeshift tent. With its quilted liner, the poncho weighed almost 2 pounds, but it was worth every

ounce. In April, for instance, when Ted Lavender was shot, they used his poncho to wrap him up, then to

carry him across the paddy, then to lift him into the chopper that took him….

The things they carried were determined to some extent by superstition. Lieutenant Cross carried his

good-luck pebble. Dave Jensen carried a rabbit's foot. Norman Bowker, otherwise a very gentle person,

carried a thumb that had been presented to him as a gift by Mitchell Sanders. The thumb was dark

brown, rubbery to the touch, and weighed 4 ounces at most. It had been cut from a VC corpse, a boy of

fifteen or sixteen. They'd found him at the bottom of an irrigation ditch, badly burned, flies in his mouth

and eyes. The boy wore black shorts and sandals. At the time of his death he had been carrying a pouch

of rice, a rifle, and three magazines of ammunition. You want my opinion, Mitchell Sanders said, there's

a definite moral here. He put his hand on the dead boy's wrist. He was quiet for a time, as if counting a

pulse, then he patted the stomach, almost affectionately, and used Kiowa's hunting hatchet to remove the thumb. Henry Dobbins asked what the moral was. Moral. You know. Moral. Sanders wrapped the thumb in toilet paper and handed it across to Norman Bowker. There was no blood. Smiling, he kicked the boy's head, watched the flies scatter, and said, It's like with that old TV show—Paladin. Have gun, will travel. Henry Dobbins thought about it. Yeah, well, he finally said. I don't see no moral. They carried USO stationary and pencils and pens. They carried Sterno, safety pins, trip flares, signal flares, spools of wire, razor blades, chewing tobacco, liberated joss sticks and statuettes of the smiling Buddha, candles, grease pencils, The Stars and Stripes, fingernail clippers, Psy Ops leaflets, bush hats, bolos, and much more. Twice a week, when the resupply choppers came in, they carried hot chow in green marmite cans and large canvas bags filled with iced beer and soda pop. They carried plastic water containers, each with a 2-gallon capacity. Mitchell Sanders carried a set of starched tiger fatigues for special occasions. Henry Dobbins carried Black Flag insecticide. Dave Jensen carried empty sandbags that could be filled at night for added protection. Lee Strunk carried tanning lotion. Some things they carried in common. Taking turns, they carried the big PRC-77 scrambler radio, which weighed 30 pounds with its battery. They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear.

Source:

O’Brien, T. (2022). Chapter 1. In Things they carried. essay, MARINER BOOKS.