# O'Brien, T. (1990). The Things They Carried. Boston: Houghton Mifflin. excerpts from "The Things They Carried", Chapter 1.

# READING: CHAPTER 1-THE THINGS THEY CARRIED *Excerpt from The Things They Carried.*

First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross carried letters from a girl named Martha, a junior at Mount Sebastian

College in New Jersey. They were not love letters, but Lieutenant Cross was hoping, so he kept them

folded in plastic at the bottom of his rucksack. In the late afternoon, after a day's march, he would dig

his foxhole, wash his hands under a canteen, unwrap the letters, hold them with the tips of his fingers,

and spend the last hour of light pretending. He would imagine romantic camping trips into the White

Mountains in New Hampshire. He would sometimes taste the envelope flaps, knowing her tongue had

been there. More than anything, he wanted Martha to love him as he loved her, but the letters were

mostly chatty, elusive on the matter of love. She was an English major at Mount Sebastian, and she

wrote beautifully about her professors and roommates and midterm exams, about her respect for

Chaucer and her great affection for Virginia Woolf. She often quoted lines of poetry; she never

mentioned the war, except to say, Jimmy, take care of yourself. The letters weighed 10 ounces. They

were signed Love, Martha, but Lieutenant Cross understood that Love was only a way of signing and did

not mean what he sometimes pretended it meant. At dusk, he would carefully return the letters to his

rucksack. Slowly, a bit distracted, he would get up and move among his men, checking the perimeter,

then at full dark he would return to his hole and watch the night and wonder if Martha was a virgin.

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.

orman 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 stationery 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

reen 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.

Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried infections. They carried chess sets,

basketballs, Vietnamese-English dictionaries, insignia of rank, Bronze Stars and Purple Hearts, plastic

cards imprinted with the Code of Conduct. They carried diseases, among them malaria and dysentery.

They carried lice and ringworm and leeches and paddy algae and various rots and molds. They carried

the land itself—Vietnam, the place, the soil—a powdery orange-red dust that covered their boots and

fatigues and faces. They carried the sky. The whole atmosphere, they carried it, the humidity, the

monsoons, the stink of fungus and decay, all of it, they carried gravity. They moved like mules. By

daylight they took sniper fire, at night they were mortared, but it was not battle, it was just the endless

march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost.