

Beasts of Burden: Soldiers in Vietnam

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The Vietnam War began after Vietnam split into two parts in 1954: Communist North Vietnam under Ho Chi Minh and South Vietnam under Ngo Dinh Diem. Soviet Russia allied with North Vietnam, and the United States reacted by forming an alliance with South Vietnam. President Lyndon B. Johnson began sending troops to Vietnam in 1964 to combat the Vietcong (Spielvogel 819-20). It was the soldiers' mission to trudge through the dense jungles of Vietnam, collapsing underground networks of tunnels and burning villages. These are the circumstances under which Tim O'Brien's narrative, "The Things They Carried," takes place. O'Brien portrays the Vietnam experience from a soldier's point of view. "The Things They Carried" contains lists of emotional and physical burdens. These burdens are influenced by each other: physical burdens remind the soldiers of their emotional burdens, and the emotional burdens affect the physical burdens the soldiers choose to carry.

The narrative lists individual burdens throughout, such as supplies, weapons, ammunition, and personal belongings. As Jon Volkmer explains, characters like Jimmie Cross and Kiowa are exposed on a more personal level by these burdens, but the physical burdens of Ted Lavender and the other soldiers define them (241). The items provide them with identities and serve as ways for them to cope with the realities they are so reluctant to face. Readers identify each character based on his equipment and form opinions from his personal belongings. For example, Mitchell Sanders is an RTO and therefore carries a radio; he also totes condoms. Because Rat Kiley is the medic, he carries plasma, malaria tablets, and surgical tape, as well as

comic books. Henry Dobbins is a machine gunner and hauls the machine gun along with ammunition. He also bears extra rations and his girlfriend's pantyhose. Dave Jensen, the field hygienist, carries soap, a toothbrush, and floss, as well as night sight vitamins. Finally, the PFCs lug rifles with ammunition, along with their personal belongings. Though all of the men share standard equipment, such as jackets, helmets, and grenades, their individuality is expressed through their personal items, since they are unique to each soldier. Moreover, the soldiers share something beyond the physical—they share the war itself and the emotional burdens it bears upon them, as illustrated in O'Brien's detailing of their emotions. He does not go into a psychoanalytical breakdown of each character. Rather, he groups them all together:

Now and then . . . there were times of panic, when they squealed or wanted to squeal but couldn't, when they twitched and made moaning sounds and covered their heads and said Dear Jesus and flopped around on the earth and fired their weapons blindly and cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to God and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. (O'Brien 285)

The stresses of war are present for all men who fight in them. The emotional burdens seem to be the same for all of them. But, because each must face this reality, he responds in his own way.

Tim O'Brien shares similar personal experiences in an interview with Patrick Hicks. There, O'Brien talks about the power of hate, how it is part of war, and how soldiers learn to cope with it. He explains:

You couldn't even see the enemy and therefore the enemy became even more hated. . . . It's like being haunted and you're getting blown up, but there are not front lines and there are no enemy soldiers in uniforms. . . . It all became the

enemy. Vietnam became the enemy. The whole place became the enemy. (qtd. in Hicks 90)

A similar scenario occurs in “The Things They Carried.” Ted Lavender is shot from a location that is unknown to both him and his comrades. They never saw it coming. As a result of Lavender’s death, the village Than Khe is laid to waste. Though the soldiers avenge Lavender by sharing the same action, they respond emotionally in their own ways. Jimmie Cross cries. Kiowa talks. Bowker listens to Kiowa talk because he cannot bear to repress it either, though he does not want to talk. This illustrates the direct connection between the soldiers’ emotional and physical burdens. The items the soldiers carry are a source of comfort from the emotional burdens, but, at the same time, those items are a continual reminder of the reality of war.

In his narrative, O’Brien continually jumps back and forth between the musings of Jimmie Cross, lists of supplies, and the journey of the soldiers through the jungle. This chaotic structure directly reflects the mindset of Jimmie Cross—as well as of the other soldiers—as he fades back and forth between the realities of the war in which he is directly involved to his fantasies of Martha, who is far from Vietnam in New Hampshire. As O’Brien writes, “[Cross] had difficulty keeping his attention on the war . . . he would slip away into daydreams, just pretending, walking barefoot along the Jersey shore, with Martha, carrying nothing. He would feel himself rising. Sun and waves and gentle winds, all love and lightness” (279). Then, boom—Reality check: “What they carried varied by mission” (279). The lists carefully and meticulously take inventory of the myriad of items soldiers carry during the war, often giving the weight, which continually builds as they drag on through the jungle. While these careful, tedious lists reflect the conciseness of the soldiers’ mission, the daydreams reflect the unwillingness of the soldiers to accept and participate in their reality. Gradually, the seemingly infinite lists of

physical burdens become finite, moving towards even heavier, more challenging burdens. These emotional burdens are exemplified in three individuals: Ted Lavender, Jimmie Cross, and Kiowa.

Fear is Ted Lavender's forte. It is a heavy burden to bear alone, without the added physical burdens war demands. O'Brien tags Lavender with the phrase "who was scared" the first time he is introduced. As a result of his fear, Ted Lavender bears a great physical burden. He "carried 34 rounds [of ammunition] . . . and he went down under an exceptional burden, more than 20 pounds of ammunition, plus the flak jacket and helmet and rations and water and toilet paper and tranquilizers and all the rest, plus unweighed fear" (O'Brien 277). The 34 rounds of ammunition far exceeds the usual 25 rounds. The tranquilizers and drugs are used as an escape from the reality of the war. Despite his fear, Ted Lavender goes alone in the jungle to urinate. Isolated from the rest of the group, he is an easy target for the Vietcong guerillas. Lavender's fate is summed up in four short sentences: "He lay with his mouth open. The teeth were broken. There was a swollen black bruise under his left eye. The cheekbone was gone" (277). O'Brien uses Ted Lavender's death as a focal point; the chronology of the story is based around it. His death also is an anchor to the reality of the war for his comrades and influences the characters' emotional reactions, revealed through Jimmie Cross and Kiowa.

O'Brien portrays Jimmie Cross's love for Martha as the heaviest of his burdens. Critic Marilyn Wesley states that he "fights the inexpressible fear the men share by obsessing about a girl he wants to love and substituting the banalities of her letters for the reality of Vietnam" (6). O'Brien uses the underground tunnel Lee Strunk is forced to explore as an allusion: it is a "[d]ense, crushing love" (280). He obsesses over the question of her virginity, a symbol of innocence and naïveté. Cross's love is physically manifested in two photographs, a bundle of

love letters, and a pebble; it exists as long as he carries them. They drive his fantasies, but, at the same time, those fantasies are bound to their physical manifestations. Leaving them behind after the death of Lavender symbolizes his acceptance of reality and his place within it. O'Brien expresses his own parallel transformation in his conversation with Patrick Hicks. There, he states, "[W]hat happens in the story is what I essentially went through. Coming over naïve and romantic and full of ideals about oneself and being really altered, irretrievably, just by proximity to violence" (89). Ted Lavender's death alters Cross—he buries the letters, burns the photographs, and throws the pebble away. Lieutenant Jimmie Cross steps into the position of leadership and vows to repress his love for Martha, substituting the burden of love with the burden of responsibility.

Unlike many of his comrades, Kiowa faces reality head on. After the death of Ted Lavender, he takes pleasure from the night, the land, the sounds that surround him, the feelings of his body, and the fact that he is alive at all. As O'Brien describes, "[W]hen he closed his eyes . . . all he could feel was the pleasure of having his boots off and the fog curling in around him and the damp soil and the Bible smells and the plush comfort of the night" (285). The "plush comfort of the night" is a dramatic contrast to the difficult conditions of the war—Kiowa lies on the hard ground with the Bible as his pillow. The Bible he carries is symbolic of his Christian faith. The feathered hatchet and moccasins he bears reflect his Indian heritage; the hatchet symbolizes the emotional immunity to grief, and the moccasins represent "silence" (279). Ironically, Kiowa cannot be silent. His dialogue gives a soldier's perspective on the death of Lavender. Though he has no grief for Lavender's death, he expresses his surprise through the "talking cure." According to Brown and Yarbrough, the talking cure is a Freudian psychoanalytical term for a form of sublimation that allows the character to express what would otherwise be repressed

(215). Kiowa repeatedly describes the circumstances of Lavender's death and how "the poor guy just dropped like so much concrete" (O'Brien 278). He also introduces a macabre humor, joking about the circumstances of Lavender's death: "zapped while zipping" (284). Kiowa may not suppress the details of Lavender's death, but he no longer feels the sting of sorrow; his numbness is a defense set up by the repression of grief. Kiowa admires Jimmie Cross because of his own invulnerability. Kiowa also carries the burden of racism—"his grandmother's distrust for the white man" (275); even his comrade, Norman Bowker, refers to Kiowa as "Indian" instead of by his name.

War affects all involved—especially the soldiers who are forced into it. There are many ways to deal with it, but, as O'Brien states, "All your values go upside down, and what you were once certain about change[s] when you get into this heart of darkness called Vietnam" (Hicks 91). The only things the soldiers can be certain of are the burdens they carry, both on their backs and in their souls. They are certain of themselves and their place in reality, though they have no desire to be there. What they carry may be "varied by mission," by "position," by "superstition," or by the individual, but everything they carry is related to their emotional state. The physical burdens they choose to bear are a result of the emotional burdens they are forced to bear, and the physical burdens are there to remind them of where they are, the "heart of darkness called Vietnam." But, for all the weight they bear, they always move forward.

Works Cited

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