

# Example by StudyDriver

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## The Vietnam War Example

The Things They Carried is a collection of stories fiction and nonfiction told by author Tim O'Brian. Through the narratives told through the eyes of his characters, it links them together because of what they carry, but paradoxically it distinguishes them as well. His recollection of short stories conveys the grotesqueness of the Vietnam War, the power stories can have, and the anti-war sentiments felt amongst and other draftees he served with. He emphasizes that war cannot be generalized, and contrasts of the effects of war and what war is like. He has an abundance of major points, often referring to anti-war themes that are seen in many veterans of the Vietnam War. With proclaiming the stories in his novel being untrue in order to emphasize the power of storytelling, there are still underlying messages that are reverberated throughout the story. Themes such the physical and emotional encumbrances, the PTSD and anxiety accompanied from combat, and lives robbed to serve the country. This is further exacerbated by himself and other interviewees of the Ken Burn Series: The Vietnam War, with other primary sources depicting veterans sharing the same feelings.

Tim O'Brian's novel alludes to the many emotional and physical tolls the war has taken on the men in his platoon. The physical toll is the enormous load they carried, their weapons, ammo, ruck sacks, and equipment totaling

over 50lbs. The items they carried were of necessity to survive, but often times they would abandon their supplies in order to alleviate their pain. They would dump their rations, set off their claymores, and not wear the issued protective gear such as the helmet and flak jacket because they wanted to become more comfortable. Often times, they would conduct these actions on their marches and during the movements they would operate in extreme heat within the jungles of Vietnam furthering the physical toll.

Along with the gear and equipment they carried, they would also carry with them, their emotions. Early in the book, we are introduced to several characters. Platoon Leader Jimmy Cross carries the letters of his love interest Martha from his home. These letters led him to carry feelings of romance, along with all the hypothetical outcomes that could arise about their feelings. He had an internal struggle with himself because he debated whether the feelings were mutual or if she had moved on as her letters indicated as they were mostly chatty and elusive on the matter of love. Whether it was their faith or their love, this war that they did not understand took them away from their homes transforming these emotions into burdens later on. Lieutenant Jimmy Cross focuses so much on his romance, that he allows for his negligence to lead to the death of Ted Lavender, a soldier under his command. Lavender would be shot because of the lax standard set by Jimmy Cross because of his focus on Martha, and the death of Lavender would be one he never overcome.

All men carry with them a sense of fear, this was seen when they conducted tunnel duty to determine if there were enemy. They would allow imagination to take over and create different situations of peril when conducting tunnel duty such as being crushed or not being heard or seen. Former Prisoner of War Senator John McCain, recounts when he entered Hanoi and was captured when his helicopter was shot down. Following his capture, he experienced the same emotions of fear that the men in Tim O'Brian's novel felt. He was constantly scared because of their lack of medical cleanliness and treatment, this fear was increased because of his injured leg becoming infected. He had heard of other tales of men being captured and dying with similar leg injuries because of the blood becoming toxic, and he was fearful because of their lack of medical ability to treat him. This constant fear even resulted him in almost cracking by wagering military information for medical treatment. Fear, as seen with the with O'Brian's platoon and John McCain made them wary of their survival and carry heavy emotional

burdens.

Although the men may have survived and moved on from the war, some continued to fight the battles upon returning home. Some of the men were unable to overcome the grief faced from the Vietnam War and continued to plague them in the form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Ken Burns has many veterans such as the author Tim O'Brian, John Musgrave, and Bill Ehrhart who still have haunting memories of the conflict. Furthermore, they didn't have an outlet to cope with their anxieties either because society rejected the Vietnam War and its veterans. They would fight feelings of depression and suicidal thoughts, or as seen in Musgrave, a bitterness towards Asians because of the battles he was engaged in. In the novel, Kiowa is well respected and loved by the men of his platoon. His death hit many men hard, but no one took it harder than Norman Bowker. Following the war, he wrote to Tim O'Brian saying that he was unable to fit in, find a stable job, or find meaningful use in his life. Bowker would try to cope with basketball and late-night drives but would ultimately hang himself three years after the war. Rat Kiley was another member of Tim O'Brian's platoon, and he was best friends with fellow soldier Curt Lemmon. They would hang out and become very close until his abrupt death from an explosive. Rat Kiley is devastated and tries to cope, during this time he and other soldiers find a baby water buffalo. After trying to care for it, he pulls out his pistol to shoot the water buffalo and begins to mutilate with multiple gunshots. His PTSD is extreme as he is trying to cope with excessive use of violence.

The Vietnam War instituted a draft to increase and bolster their numbers to deter the spread of communism into southern Vietnam. Norman Bowker deployed to Vietnam enamored with the idea of becoming a sort of war hero by earning awards elicited from valor. He would earn seven combat badges including the Combat Infantry Badge, but the Silver Star eluded him. All the glamour he thought he would receive coming back from the war was absent, and he had a hard time adjusting to civilian life. He would be unable to hold a job and assimilate back into society because everything had changed. His duration in war left him different from the rest of his hometown, and his obligations changed upon returning home with his life now fundamentally removed due to answering the nation's call. John Musgrave, another veteran interviewed in Ken Burns The Vietnam War shares similar sentiment with his life changed, as he was also initially eager to serve his country. However, he says that during the war he

suffered many injuries and returned home to a country that did not honor him, much like Norman Bowker in returning to his community who didn't honor what he had done. Bowker and Musgrave changed during the war, and both came back to their homes with depression and suicidal thoughts because their communities did not help them. Musgrave's interview echoed other veterans as seen in the responses in the Veterans' review of *Apocalypse Now*, which was a clip portraying American soldiers deployed to Vietnam as evil, psychotics, and unstable.

This influenced many communities to reject other Vietnam War Veterans to reject their soldiers just as Musgrave was. Many veterans such as Musgrave, wanted the country to know they fought on the government's orders in a cause that was portrayed as noble, and they were not what society was painting them to be. Another instance was in June of 1968, Tim O'Brian had just graduated Macalester College with plans to attend Harvard's Graduate School. These plans were changed because he was called into the Vietnam War through the draft. Believing he was too good to serve and not acknowledging the reasons for U.S. intervention, he began to have anxiety over his looming service. Tim O'Brian's life was altered profoundly, his plans were voided because of his mandatory service, and he even thought of escaping into Canada like others had. His situation represented a large majority of Americans who had gone to college, they had to abandon their goals for a war they did not believe in nor understand. Sharing Tim O'Brian's belief, Bill Ehrhart shared the same feelings when interviewed in the Ken Burns series. He did not believe in the war's cause like Tim because the agenda wasn't to save Southern Vietnam but out of refusal to admit the Johnson administration had messed up.

Stories have the power to tell a narrative. Tim O'Brian's *The Things They Carried* was an anti-war novel focusing on the burdens carried by soldiers, the PTSD that lingered with soldiers following the war, and the impact the draft on the lives of many young Americans. There is a bitterness through the different stories that illustrate why not only the Vietnam War but war in general is unnecessary. He argues that the war irreversibly changed the lives of many men because they lost their futures or were unable to function again in normal society. Tim O'Brian was a participant in the Ken Burns series, and in the last episode he bitterly questions why we participated in the Vietnam and shed the blood of so many young Americans in a cause that he did not believe in. The book he wrote

furtherers that sentiment to caution and influence the U.S. that war is problematic.