

Tim O'Brien

AUTHOR OF *GOING AFTER CACCIATO*

A black and white photograph showing the silhouettes of several soldiers walking in a line across a flat, open field. The soldiers are carrying gear, and the background is a bright, hazy sky.

The Things They Carried

"A marvel of storytelling . . . [*The Things They Carried*] matters not only to the reader interested in Vietnam but to anyone interested in the craft of writing as well." —*New York Times*

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 a virgin, he was almost sure. 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. Until he was shot, Ted Lavender carried 6 or 7 ounces of premium dope, which for him was a necessity. Mitchell Sanders, the RTO, carried condoms. 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 away.

They were called legs or grunts.

To carry something was to hump it, as when Lieutenant Jimmy Cross humped his love for Martha up the hills

The powerful and enduring work of fiction about men and war—more than one million copies in print.

They carried malaria tablets, love letters, 28-pound mine detectors, dope, illustrated Bibles, each other. And if they made it home alive, they carried unrelenting images of a nightmarish war that history is only beginning to absorb. Since its first publication, *The Things They Carried* has become an unparalleled Vietnam testament, a classic work of American literature, and a profound study of men at war that illuminates the capacity, and the limits, of the human heart and soul.

"The best of these stories—and none is written with less than the sharp edge of honed vision—are memory and prophecy. These tell us not where we were but where we are, and perhaps where we will be." —Richard Eder, *Los Angeles Times*

"*The Things They Carried* is as good as any piece of literature can get . . . It is controlled and wild, deep and tough, perceptive and shrewd." —*Chicago Sun-Times*

"[Tim] O'Brien's passion and memory may have been his torment all these years, but they have also been his gift . . . This is prose headed for the nerve center of what was Vietnam." —*Boston Globe*

"You've got to read this book . . . In a world filled too often with numbness, or shifting values, these stories shine in a strange and opposite direction, moving against the flow, illuminating life's wonder." —*Dallas Morning News*

The Things They Carried won France's prestigious Prix du Meilleur Livre Étranger and the *Chicago Tribune* Heartland Prize; it was also a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Cover design by Roberto de Vicq de Cumtich
Cover photo by Olivier Noonan/AP WideWorld



www.broadwaybooks.com

Our Reading Group Companions are available
at www.randomhouse.com/resources/rgg.html

US \$14.95 / \$16.95 CAN

ISBN 978-0-7679-0289-2



9 780767 902892

