



‘The Things They Carried’

by Tim O’Brien

Background information

HISTORICAL CONTEXT - VIETNAM

- o North Vietnam (communists) against South Vietnam (supported by USA)
- o USA involvement motivated by fear of communism taking over the world
- o Early 1960'S Americans began a large scale military “defence” of South Vietnam

HISTORICAL CONTEXT - VIETNAM

o Viet Cong:

- highly elusive and misunderstood
- fighting in familiar landscape for a cause they believed in
- Engaged in relentless harassment – ambushes, booby traps, sniping, concealment in the jungle, tunnelling
- proved impossible to defeat

HISTORICAL CONTEXT - VIETNAM

o US troops:

- Did not know who they were fighting
- Landscape was unfamiliar and foreign
- US (country and individuals) involvement uncertain; conscription (ballot)
- Employed tanks, aerial bombing, napalm bombs (jelly-like gasoline), large troop movements, chemical warfare

HISTORICAL CONTEXT - VIETNAM

o Late 1960's:

- Peace movement in US growing
- US embassy in Saigon attacked
- War started to be seen as unwinnable
- In response to overwhelming pressure and an inability to strike decisively against the Viet Cong, President Nixon decided to pull out of Vietnam
- January 27, 1973: The Paris Peace Accords are signed by the U.S., North Vietnam, South Vietnam and the Viet Cong.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT - VIETNAM

o Impact:

- America deeply troubled by Vietnam experience
- 58,000 lives lost; 303,635 wounded
- Defeat of world's mightiest military force by a 'tin pot collection of peasants'
- Massive social upheaval – veterans NOT welcomed home; difficulties adjusting

CULTURAL CONTEXT - VIETNAM

- o Enormous cultural gap between the Americans and Vietnamese – had implications
- o American's did not really see the Vietnamese as fellow human beings – described as “gooks, dinks and slopes” – many innocent people died as a result
- o “Sixties” – taking off with challenges of authority, free love and drug experimentation
- o Drugs heightened the sense for many soldiers that this war was strange and unreal

CULTURAL CONTEXT - USA

- o Culturally America was completely uninterested in the Vietnam defeat – until filmic attempts to come to terms with it hit screens: *Heart of Darkness*, *Apocalypse Now*
- o These gave way to the likes of *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket* – films giving the distinct impression that America actually won. Others?
- o For a new generation of movie goers – these accounts became the truth

CONSIDER....

**The Vietnam War is
always interesting
because the *truth* about
it seems almost
impossible to tell.**

THEMES: Burdens

- o Characters carry things literally and figuratively
- o Heavy physical loads
- o Heavy emotional loads – grief, terror, love, longing
- o Carry the weight of reputation – the burden of fear
- o Post war – psychological burdens; survivor guilt, post traumatic stress disorder

THEMES: Shame as motivation

- o Fear of being shamed before one's peers is a powerful and motivating factor in war
- o Shame (being thought of as a coward) prompted reluctant men to go to Vietnam
- o Shame affects soldiers relationships with each other

Themes

o Storytelling:

- a coping mechanism as well as a strategy for communication

o Morality:

- The jungle blurs boundaries between right and wrong

o Loneliness and isolation:

- Repeated emphasis on the impact of solitude