



The Things They Carried

by Tim O'Brien

Teacher's Guide

Written By Mary Ellen Snodgrass

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Synopsis

The Things They Carried

Carrying letters and photos from Martha, a student he met at Mt. Sebastian College in New Jersey, 1st Lt. Jimmy Cross escapes war in dreams of a one-sided love. The first week of April, he receives a pebble from her that becomes his talisman.

On April 16, his unit, Alpha Company, searches out a tunnel complex at Than Khe, where Lee Strunk draws a number sending him into the subterranean warren. On his safe return, Ted Lavender is shot in the head.

In retaliation, after a helicopter removes Ted's remains, the unit wrecks the village. Cross blames himself for loving Martha more than he loved his men. He weeps that she was not worth his devotion. One morning, he burns the letters and photos and cultivates hate and leadership in place of love.

Love

Years later, Cross visits a war buddy, Tim O'Brien, in Massachusetts. Cross carries a photo of Martha she gave him in 1979 at a college reunion. She had training in nursing and became a Lutheran missionary to Third World countries. O'Brien wants to write about Cross' experiences. Cross hesitantly gives his okay.

Spin

At age 43, O'Brien remembers the free-time activities of his buddies. Mitchell Sanders picks lice and mails them to his draft board. Norman Bowker and Henry Dobbins play checkers. O'Brien continues reliving the "bad stuff," including the five days following an old Vietnamese man through a mine field in Betangan Peninsula. O'Brien's daughter

Kathleen thinks her father is obsessed by war memories. The vignettes of Norman thinking about his father's yearning to see war medals, Kiowa teaching Kiley and Jensen a rain dance, and Azar executing Lavender's puppy recur from O'Brien's 19th and 20th years. The worst is killing a young man outside My Khe with a hand grenade.

On the Rainy River

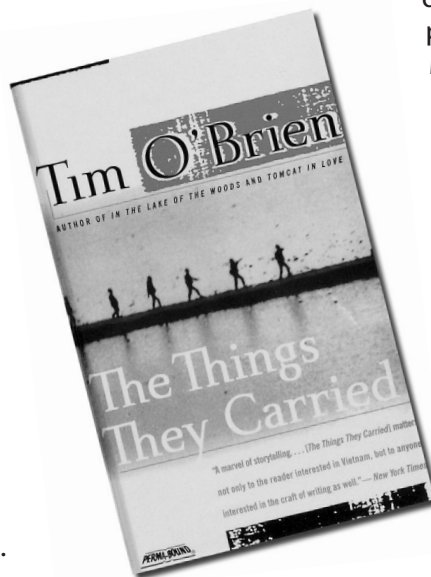
On June 17, 1968, O'Brien, only a month out of college, is drafted. He had modestly denounced the war. Working at a meat-packing plant in Worthington, Minnesota, he worries through the next month and longs to flee to Winnipeg. The fear of social censure makes him sick inside. He drives north to Rainy River, Minnesota, to the Tip Top Lodge on the Canadian border. For six days, he remains in the company of Elroy Berdahl, an 81-year-old innkeeper who cooks him fish and respects his privacy.

Symptoms worsen. By night, O'Brien lies sleepless; by day, he helps Elroy split and stack firewood. When O'Brien runs out of cash, Elroy reduces the total to the winter rate

and offers him wages for his help. O'Brien refuses to take the money, which Elroy tacks to his door in an envelope marked "emergency fund." On the sixth day, Elroy takes him fishing, a ploy that offers a chance to flee to Canada. At age 21, O'Brien can only weep and reject the opportunity. At noon the next day, he leaves Elroy's money behind and returns home to go to war.

Enemies

In late July on patrol, Lee Strunk and Dave Jensen fight over a missing jackknife. Jensen, the stronger of the two, wins the fight by breaking Strunk's nose, but worries that Strunk will shoot him in the back. To even the score, Jensen breaks his own nose and admits stealing the knife.



Friends

In late August, Jensen and Strunk sign a pact to end the other's life if it is compromised by severe injury. In October, Strunk loses his right leg on a mortar round. He begs Jensen not to carry out the pact. On the flight to a medical unit, Strunk dies of his injuries.

How to Tell a True War Story

Three days into a westward march, Curt Lemon dies while playing catch with smoke grenades with 19-year-old Bob "Rat" Kiley. Jensen sings "Lemon Tree" while the men retrieve Lemon's body parts from a tree. In retaliation, the unit torments a dying baby water buffalo, which the men dump into a village well. Kiley writes to Lemon's sister about his death. She does not write back. Years later, O'Brien tells the event as a love story.

To illustrate the incredible experiences of war, O'Brien tells about Mitchell Sanders, who spends a week at a listening-post near Quang Ngai. He recalls voices, music, choirs, and chanters with a bomb run by support personnel. In the silence, the listeners still hear the music. On return to base camp, they conceal their experience from the colonel. Sanders concludes that "Nobody listens." The next day, Sanders admits to O'Brien that he made up the extreme types of music they heard.

The Dentist

In February, the unit patrols the Rocket Pocket on the South China Sea. When a dentist arrives to treat the men, Lemon faints at the thought of pain. The next night, he forces the dentist to pull a healthy tooth.

Sweetheart of Song

Tra Bong Kiley tells about a girl who visited a medical detachment in the mountains west of Chu Lai. Without military discipline, the men share the aid station with Special Forces who arrived in the early 1960s. Mark Fossie sends for his girl, Mary Anne Bell, a 17-year-old high school graduate from Cleveland. The two spend two weeks in a bunker on the perimeter near the Special Forces, who remain to themselves. The second week, she visits the nearby village, swims in the river, and treats casualties.

After learning about rifles, Mary Anne begins staying out nights with the Special Forces. Fossie

maneuvers her into an engagement and a return to the sedate life. At the end of the third week, she disappears. Three weeks later, she returns with the Special Forces and disappears into their quarters. Kiley and Eddie Diamond approach the building after midnight and find her sitting amid fetid leopard and human remains and wearing a necklace of human tongues. Kiley realizes that she is lost to the mystique of combat.

Two months later, Kiley, who is on R&R in Bangkok, learns from Diamond that she continued taking chances on patrol. She walked off to the mountains and did not return. After a search by MPs and the CID, she was declared missing and joined the war legend. Fossie received a medical discharge.

Stockings

Henry Dobbins goes into combat with pantyhose wrapped around his neck. In August, he trips a dud land mine; a week later, he survives a firefight in the open. After his girlfriend dumps him in October, he keeps the pantyhose as a good luck charm.

Church

In an abandoned pagoda west of Batangan Peninsula, the unit encounters two monks. During a week at the site, the two men assist the soldiers. Dobbins considers entering the order to be "nice to people." Kiowa thinks that using the pagoda for war is wrong.

The Man I Killed

O'Brien obsesses about the mutilated jaw of the young man he shoots. He makes up a fantasy biography of a man born in 1956 on a farm at My Khe. Bookish, but patriotic, he wanted to teach math. He attended class at the university in Saigon in 1964, but died on his first day as a rifleman in the 48th Vietcong Battalion. Kiowa tries to draw O'Brien away from the corpse and reminds him the man was armed and could have killed as well as be killed. Kiowa rummages through the man's personal items and orders O'Brien to talk about his feelings.

Ambush

Kathleen O'Brien asks if her father killed anyone. He lies that he did not. To relieve his inner torment, he keeps writing stories and thinking of the man he killed with a grenade after seeing him go on dawn patrol. The image of carnage haunts O'Brien.

Style

At a burned hamlet, the unit sees a 14-year-old girl dance with her hands over her ears. Her family is killed and burned. Azar mocks her dance until Dobbins threatens to drop him into a well.

Speaking of Courage

On July 4 after the war, Norman Bowker drives his father's Chevy around the lake and past Slater Park and Sally Kramer, an old girlfriend who is now a married woman. He carries seven medals, but not the Silver Star. He is haunted by memories of a foul stench at the unit's bivouac at a swamp along the Song Tra Bong River. A Vietnamese woman warns them that the village uses the field as a latrine. Late that night, mortar fire pins them down. Kiowa slips under the ooze.

Bowker stops at the A&W for a burger and fries and attempts to tell the order-taker over the intercom about the bad memories. He tries to tell his father about Kiowa's death and about the Silver Star. On the twelfth turn around the park, Bowker wades into the lake to watch fireworks.

Notes

In spring 1975, O'Brien receives a disjointed letter about Bowker's attempts to work, go back to school, and rid himself of guilt over Kiowa's death. Bowker reads O'Brien's book, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*. O'Brien feels smug about his ability to objectify war experiences, but is haunted by Bowker's letter for over a month. O'Brien publishes *Going After Cacciato* and begins writing about Kiowa's death in a post-war story called "Speaking of Courage."

O'Brien sends a copy to Bowker, who questions the absence of Kiowa's death. Eight months later in August 1978, Bowker kills himself. A decade later, O'Brien turns his story into the true account of Kiowa's demise in the "shit field."

In the Field

The 18 survivors in the mucky field search for Kiowa's body. Cross, carrying a New Testament his father mailed him in January, blames himself for camping in the field. Bowker and Sanders locate Kiowa's rucksack as Cross mentally pens a letter to Kiowa's father. At age 24, Cross rues entering ROTC. The boy who was with Kiowa regrets that Kiowa switched on a flashlight to look at a picture of Billie's girl. The light drew fire that killed Kiowa.

At noon, Bowker locates the body under two feet of water. Secretly glad that they are still alive, they ready the remains for chopper pickup. Cross is still not sure whether he will write to Kiowa's father.

Good Form

At 43, O'Brien feels that events after the war are inventions. Because he was afraid to look at combat deaths, he continues writing stories to unearth the truth and "make things present."

Field Trip

After writing about Kiowa's death, O'Brien and 10-year-old Kathleen visit Vietnam in August. At Quang Ngai City, she asks what he wanted from the war. He replies, "To stay alive." She considers her father weird.

At the field where Kiowa died, O'Brien regrets losing a friend along with his pride. He regrets the absence of "the person I had once been." He deposits Kiowa's moccasins in the field and feels that he'd "finally worked my way out."

The Ghost Soldiers

Around November 19, O'Brien is shot in the side at a pagoda in Tri Binh, where Kiley treats the wound and hugs him as the chopper prepares to carry him away. Returned to Alpha Company in mid-December after Kiley has been shipped to Japan for medical care, O'Brien takes a second shot, this time in the buttocks, which medic Bobby Jorgenson bungles.

At the end of December, O'Brien leaves the 91st Evac Hospital to work at battalion supply. In relative safety, he misses the danger of combat. In March, his unit takes a break. At midnight, O'Brien parties with Dobbins, Jensen, Sanders, and Azar and hears the story of Morty Phillips, who contracts polio from skinny dipping in the river.

Three days later, O'Brien confesses to Sanders his grudge against Jorgenson. Sanders credits the new medic with keeping Morty alive. O'Brien realizes that Jorgenson is one of the guys, but O'Brien is now an outsider. The next morning, Jorgenson apologizes to O'Brien for the poor treatment he gave in his first firefight.

Turned mean with bitterness, O'Brien pursues his grudge. Sanders advises him to let it go. Teaming

with Azar, O'Brien works out a series of sounds to terrorize Jorgenson on night guard duty. He and Azar rig up flares, sandbags, ropes, and pulleys. O'Brien hates himself for becoming part of the horror of war.

At 3:00 A. M., they set off the first flare, then three more. An hour before dawn, O'Brien gives up the game; Azar continues. Jorgenson fires at the apparition. O'Brien rocks and hugs himself. Jorgenson cleans a gash on O'Brien's forehead. O'Brien proposes killing Azar.

Night Life

Sanders tells about Kiley's last days in the war, when the platoon moved at night for two weeks. He goes from silence to manic talking and scratching, then breaks down. The next morning, he shoots his foot. As the chopper approaches, Cross promises to call the self-inflicted injury an accident.

The Lives of the Dead

Recalling his fourth day in the war, O'Brien asserts that "stories can save us." In February 1969, after an air strike along the South China Sea, Jensen mocks the corpse of an elderly Vietnamese man. Kiowa compliments O'Brien for not taking part in mockery. The corpse makes O'Brien think of 9-year-old Linda, whom he "dated" in spring 1956. Weeks later, Nick Veenhof grabs Linda's cap and uncovers her bare scalp and stitches where surgeons have removed a tumor.

In 1990, O'Brien recalls that he had wanted to save Linda from cancer, which killed her that September. He recognizes that stories are soldiers' means of removing the terror of death and of keeping the dead alive. He relives recovery of Lemon's remains from the tree and regrets seeing Kiowa die. A month after Lavender's death, Sanders and O'Brien help recover the dead. In 1990, O'Brien identifies his writing as "Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story."

Timeline

- 1954** French colonial rule in Indochina ends.
- 1955** Communists take control in North Vietnam; Republic of Vietnam is established in the south. United States agrees to train South Vietnamese army.
- 1956** North Vietnam begins aiding Vietcong rebels in South Vietnam.
- July 8, 1959** First U.S. military advisers killed by Vietcong.
- Dec. 11, 1961** U.S. combat aircraft sent to Vietnam.
- Aug. 2-4, 1964** North Vietnamese torpedo boats allegedly attack U.S. destroyers on patrol in the Gulf of Tonkin.
- Aug. 7, 1964** Congress passes resolution authorizing president to take whatever steps necessary to prevent further attacks and to halt North Vietnamese aggression.
- Feb. 11, 1965** President Johnson orders air attacks on North Vietnam.
- March 2, 1965** Rolling Thunder air campaign against Vietnam begins.
- March 8, 1965** U.S. ground troops land in Vietnam.
- Aug. 18-21, 1965** U.S. troops defeat Vietcong at Chu Lai.
- May 15-June 23, 1966** South Vietnamese government puts down Buddhist uprisings.
- December 1966** U.S. troop strength in Vietnam reaches 389,000.
- Jan. 30, 1968** The VC launch the Tet offensive in 30 South Vietnamese cities.
- Feb. 29, 1968** Tet Offensive ends. U.S. and South Vietnamese troops destroy the Viet Cong as a fighting force but suffer severe psychological defeat.
- March 16, 1968** American troops kill 200 Vietnamese civilians at My Lai.
- March 31, 1968** Johnson halts air attacks north of 20th parallel.
- May 10, 1968** Peace talks begin in Paris, but talks reach a stalemate.
- April 1969** U.S. troop strength in Vietnam peaks at 543,000.
- July 8, 1969** U.S. begins withdrawing troops from Vietnam.
- April 30, 1970** U.S. and South Vietnamese troops invade Cambodia.
- July 1970** Senate revokes Gulf of Tonkin resolution.
- Aug. 11, 1971** South Vietnam assumes all ground

combat responsibilities.

December

1971 U.S. troop strength in Vietnam drops to 158,000.

Spring 1972 North Vietnamese launch heavy attacks against South Vietnam. U.S. responds with massive air attacks.

December

1972 Only 24,200 U.S. troops remain in Vietnam.

Jan. 28, 1973 Cease fire takes effect.

March 29, 1973 Last U.S. troops are withdrawn.

April 1, 1973 Last U.S. prisoners of war are released.

January 1975 North Vietnam invades South Vietnam.

April 30, 1975 Saigon falls to Communists.

Author Sketch



William Timothy O'Brien is one of a coterie of late twentieth-century spokespersons for the Vietnam War. He was born in Austin, Minnesota, on October 1, 1946, to elementary school teacher Ava E. Schultz and William T. O'Brien, an insurance agent who had published accounts of Iwo Jima and Okinawa in the *New York Times*. O'Brien toyed with thoughts of becoming a writer and indulged his imagination by performing magic tricks. One of many young war protesters, he earned a degree in political science from Macalester College. He was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1968 and served in the infantry. He advanced to sergeant during two years of combat in Vietnam and was decorated with a purple heart for a shrapnel wound. In 1987, he received a Vietnam Veterans of America award.

For graduate study at Harvard University, to which he earned a full academic scholarship, O'Brien worked on a dissertation entitled "Case Studies in American Military Interventions." He abandoned academics and began writing at the same time that he was exorcising the grim remains of war from his psyche. He interned for a year as national reporter for the *Washington Post* and submitted freelance work first to *Playboy* then to the *Massachusetts Review*, *New Yorker*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Esquire*, and *Redbook*. Dedicated to fiction, he related the foot soldier's story with a first novel, *If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* and continued his focus on the Vietnam conflict.

Critic's Corner

O'Brien's star rose rapidly. His fourth novel, a loosely constructed group of fantasy stories entitled *Going after Cacciato*, won a 1979 National Book Award, beating out novels by John Cheever and John Irving. Stand-alone chapters won two O. Henry Awards for short fiction.

While trying to complete *The Lake of the Woods*, O'Brien felt compelled to write *The Things They Carried: A Work of Fiction*, a metafiction that blurs the lines between memoir and fiction, reality and interpretation. Against a great emotional and geographical backdrop, the main character, who bears the author's name and some of his background and history, is a narrative entity separate from the author himself. The irony of the physical weaponry that men carry in tandem with fear, dismay, and exuberance produces a credibility in O'Brien's vignettes. The book disturbs readers while simultaneously satisfying a curiosity to know what it was like to fight a doomed war.

A finalist for the 1990 Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award, the novel earned merit for its perusal of the great divide between reality and the surreal. Locked into the fantasies and imagination of young men on extended patrol in enemy territory, the web of interior monologues and supposition connects the truth of their involvement and the truth of soldiering as the characters want it to be. *The Things They Carried* won the Heartland Prize from the *Chicago Tribune* and citations from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Massachusetts Arts and Humanities Foundation, and the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference.

Other Works by Tim O'Brien

- Going after Cacciato* (1978)
- If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home* (1973)
- In the Lake of the Woods* (1994)
- Northern Lights* (1975)
- The Nuclear Age* (1981)
- Tomcat in Love* (1998)
- Twinkle, Twinkle* (1994)

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General Objectives

1. To enumerate the conventions of war literature
2. To comment on the psychological aspects of foreboding, loss, fear, and violence
3. To evaluate behaviors and attitudes required of soldiers under fire, particularly bonding with buddies
4. To explain the set-up and management of a patrol or listening post
5. To note the alteration in behavior during times of danger, especially at night
6. To contrast types of humor, pranks, and other tension relievers
7. To analyze the title image
8. To account for relief in a surviving soldier when a comrade dies
9. To characterize surrealism and metafiction
10. To explain the source of truth in war stories

Specific Objectives

1. To validate the emotions of each soldier
2. To explain why O'Brien wants to avoid the draft
3. To list examples of Alpha Company's inhumanity and savagery
4. To discuss the strengths of friendship between Norman Bowker and Tim O'Brien
5. To depict O'Brien's battle with self on the Rainy River
6. To account for Kiowa's lasting influence on his buddies
7. To analyze O'Brien's roles as son, father, citi-

- zen, worker, friend, writer, and soldier
8. To project what will happen to the legend of Mary Anne Bell
 9. To recount the terrors of night attack, a booby-trap, entering in a tunnel, filling body bags, fatigue, despair, and O'Brien's recuperation from wounds
 10. To express the aspects of life that are missing in Vietnam, particularly family, a balance of the sexes, cleanliness, relaxation, and independence

Literary Terms and Applications

For a better understanding of Tim O'Brien's fiction, present the following terms and applications:

Anti-hero: a protagonist or central figure who lacks the usual heroic qualities of an admirable person or leader, particularly skill, grace, honesty, courage, and truth. O'Brien rids his character of nobility by establishing the internal struggle between wanting to flee to Canada to protest an immoral war and upholding the moral standards and expectations of a conservative Minnesota community. Unlike the decorated heroes of past history, he lives in the gray area of a seemingly meaningless war. He considers accepting the draft notice a cowardly act.

Irony: an implied discrepancy between what is said or done and what is meant. A bitter dramatic irony in Kiowa's ignoble death and disappearance into a stinking field used as a Vietnamese latrine produces a pervasive symbol of the Vietnam War and all war.

Metafiction: a digressive novel that philosophizes about writing, style, truth, and authors. Central to O'Brien's thesis is the source of truth that the novelist must winnow out from tentative war memoir, overblown brags, and the elements that soldiers refuse to face and particularize to non-veterans.

Cross-Curricular Sources

Novels

Mariano Azuela, *The Underdogs*
 Tom Clancy, *Without Remorse*
 Stephen Coontz, *Flight of the Intruder*
 Stephen Crane, *The Red Badge of Courage*
 Charles Frasier, *Cold Mountain*
 Joe Haldeman, *The Forever War*

Bao Ninh, *Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam*
 Ernest Hemingway, *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*
 Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*
 Michael Shaara, *The Killer Angels*
 Dalton Trumbo, *Johnny Got His Gun*

Nonfiction

Christopher J. Anderson, *Grunts: U.S. Infantry in Vietnam*
 Philip Caputo, *A Rumor of War*
 James Carroll, *American Requiem: God, My Father, and the War that Came Between Us*
 Bernard Edelman, *Dear America: Letters Home From Vietnam*
 Le Ly Hayslip, *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places*
 Paul Henriksen, *The Living and the Dead: Robert McNamara and Five Lives of a Lost War*
 Ron Kovic, *Born on the Fourth of July*
 Michael Lind, *Vietnam, the Necessary War: A Reinterpretation of America's Most Disasterous Military Conflict*
 Stewart O'Nan, *The Vietnam Reader*
 Al Santoli, ed., *Everything We Had: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Thirty-Three American Soldiers Who Fought It*
 Winnie Smith, *American Daughter Gone to War*
 Lewis Sorley, *A Better War: The Unexamined Victories and Final Tragedy of America's Last Years in Vietnam*
 Harry G. Summers, *Vietnam War Almanac*
 Jon Swain, *River of Time: A Memoir of Vietnam and Cambodia*

CD-ROMs

The Vietnam Era (Primary Source Media)

Internet

The American Experience: Vietnam Online
www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/amex/vietnam/index.html
 David Drake, "Viet-Nam,"
david-drake.com/nam.html
 History of the Vietnam War
web20.mindlink.net/vets/hisintro.html
 Investigating the Vietnam War
www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/vietnam.html
 The Vietnam War
www.vietvet.org/vmannew.htm
 Vietnam War Internet Project
www.lbjlib.utexas.edu/shwv/shwvhome.html
 The Wall
www.vietvet.org/thewall.htm

Videos

All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)
Apocalypse Now (1979)
Bat 21 (1988)

Born on the Fourth of July (1988)
Flight of the Intruder (1991)
Full Metal Jacket (1987)
Go Tell the Spartans (1977)
Platoon (1986)
Vietnam: A Television History (WGBH, 1983)

Themes and Motifs

A study of the central issues and situations in *The Things They Carried* should include these aspects:

Themes

- dilemma
- family
- war
- government
- isolation
- group mentality
- individuality
- survivalism
- torment
- truth

Motifs

- coping with regret and random violence
- understanding the various psychological states that accompany combat
- assuming the role of scribe and story-bearer
- coping with a sense of unfinished business
- recapturing the whimsical and surreal elements of war

The Importance of Setting

The milieu of author Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* moves out of time sequence over the timeline of the character Tim O'Brien's induction, combat service, post-war trauma, and exorcism of regret. In a search for truth, he covers the flight in miniature from a foul pork meatpacking plant in Worthington, Minnesota, to the run-down Tip Top Lodge on Rainy River with its roof canted toward Canada, a symbol for the dismal emotional climate that haunts recruits and Vietnam veterans returning to the States. In sight of the border, young Tim weeps out his perplexity to the emotional, visceral, and moral response to an unjust war. At noon on the seventh day of withdrawing from home and work, he drives back home to honor a draft notice.

The combat terrain that dominates the war varies over a number of familiar wartime vignettes—the burning village, the dark foxhole, the misty trail into dark mountains, and black stillness of a week-long listening post. An ingenious use of mystery is the character of Mary Anne Bell, who masters the wartime elements of village visits and aid station treatment before abandoning her fiancé at their bunker, joining the Special Forces in their hootch, and moving barefoot over the dark jungle trails toward a nighttime ambush. Like the misery and disillusion of young men learning about war first-hand, Mary Anne becomes one with the uncertain path that lies ahead, into the land of the Montagnards. Her story rapidly loses reality as she fades into a war-time legend.

At a halfway point, O'Brien departs a rehabilitation hospital for the second time and draws a less fearful assignment at a battalion supply depot. Even there, where returning forces enjoy night-time conversation, reliving Curt Lemon's trick-or-treat adventure in the nude, and a screening of *Barbarella*, O'Brien and Azar construct enough terror with flares and sandbag ghosts that they terrorize Jorgenson, who stands guard duty at the perimeter. To O'Brien, life in a safe zone isolates him more wretchedly than walking point on night patrol because he loses the close emotional support of men with whom he once shared danger. The feeling of exclusion exacerbates an ongoing hurt that he formerly characterized as "the burden of being alive."

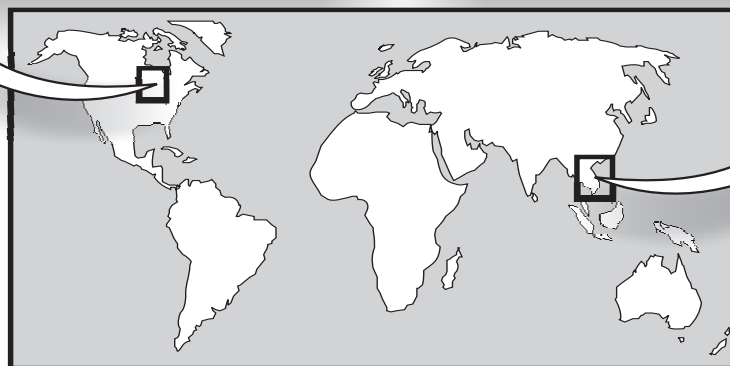
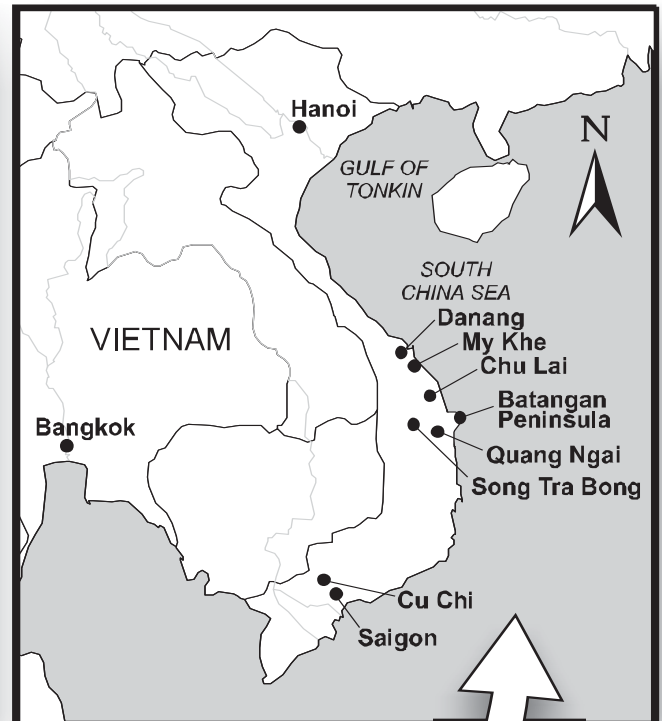
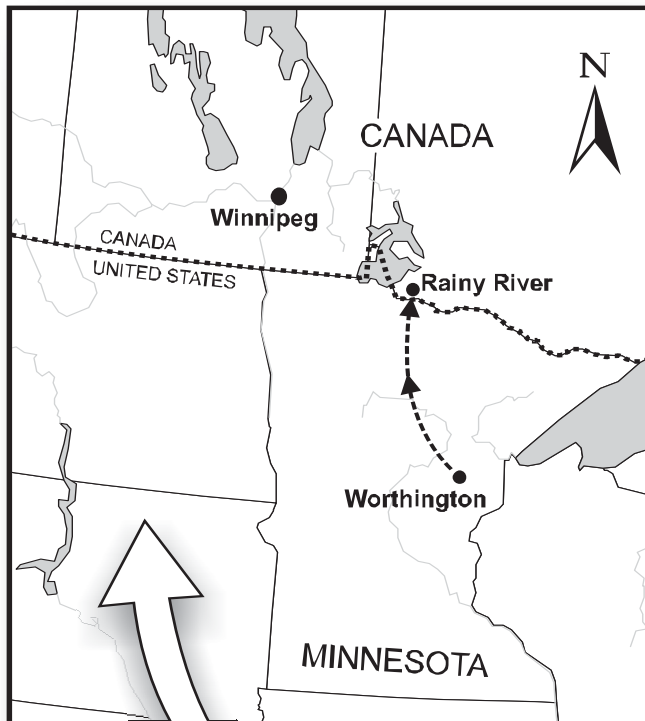
The home territory that veterans enter becomes the next pathless trail—a "permanent twilight" of ruined lives that perpetuates their isolation amid noncombatants. Ten times on the Fourth of July, Norman drives his father's Chevy around Slater Park, over the causeway, by Chautauqua Park, and past the home of Sally Kramer, an old girlfriend. He wades into the lake to view fireworks, a mockery of the real pyrotechnics he remembers from combat. After his futile attempts at war narrative, jobs, and more schooling, his suicide in a YMCA locker room parallels the shredded remains of Curt Lemon in a jungle tree, Ted Lavender's head wound in the field, Kiowa's maimed body sucked into a swampy bivouac, and the self-mutilation of Rat Kiley, who chooses a shot in the foot as the only way to flee combat alive.

Meaning Study

Below are significant words, phrases, or sentences from the novel. Explain each in context. Chapter and page numbers pinpoint each entry so that you can re-read the passage in which it appears.

1. 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. ("The Things They Carried," p. 3)
(Kiowa's name indicates a tribe of nomadic hunters of the central and southwestern plains. Driven south from the Dakota hills in 1800 by the Sioux, the Kiowa began losing strength and were forcibly resettled in Oklahoma in 1868. In 1887, the government banned the Sun Dance, the center of religious heritage that bound them to nature.)

2. They used a hard vocabulary to contain the terrible softness. *Greased* they'd say. *Offed*, *lit up*, *zapped while zipping*. It wasn't cruelty, just stage presence. ("The Things They Carried," p. 20)
(Like actors in a performance, the men of Alpha company play the part of combat heroes, tough soldiers capable of withstanding firefights and losing comrades to horrific wounds without showing emotion. More than death, they fear the loss of stage presence, the ability to play the part without showing the real persona beneath the mask. To conceal the fear of death, they make up wise-mouth slang for "killed.")
3. I'd be screaming at them, telling them how much I detested their blind, thoughtless, automatic acquiescence to it all, their simple-minded patriotism, their prideful ignorance, their love-it-or-leave-it platitudes, how they were sending me off to fight a war they didn't



understand and didn't want to understand. I held them responsible. ("On the Rainy River," p. 45)

(In unvoiced arguments, O'Brien rails against mindless patriotism. He summarizes his faceless adversaries as members of the Kiwanis, VFW, and Lions club, merchants, farmers, the pious, housewives, the PTA, and the country club.)

4. Nobody listens. Nobody hears nothin'. ("How to Tell a True War Story," p. 76)
(O'Brien records the desperation with which Mitchell Sanders tries to explain the night terrors on patrol. The strange sounds that permeate the fog characterize the failure of Americans to understand Vietnam's exotic environs, where soldiers function on the brink of madness during routine night maneuvers amid unknown and unseen adversaries. When Sanders admits the next day that he embroidered the types of sounds with a glee club, barbershop quartet, chamber music, and opera, he returns to his initial theme that the moral of the story is jungle quiet, the unearthly silence that war violates.)
5. Originally, in the early 1960s, the place had been set up as a Special Forces outpost, and when Rat Kiley arrived nearly a decade later, a squad of six Green Berets still used the compound as a base of operations. ("Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong," p. 92)
(Alpha Company exhibits a fear-tinged respect for the Special Forces, popularly known as Green Berets for their distinctive headgear. The first Special Forces were created in 1952 and specialized in guerrilla warfare and counterinsurgency techniques.)
6. In the village of My Khe, as in all of Quang Ngai, patriotic resistance had the force of tradition, which was partly the force of legend, and from his earliest boyhood the man I killed would have listened to stories about the heroic Trung sisters and Tran Hung Dao's famous rout of the Mongols and Le Loi's final victory against the Chinese at Tot Dong. ("The Man I Killed," p. 125)
(O'Brien refers to the local lore, beginning with Trung Trac and Trung Nhi, noblewomen who, in A.D. 42, organized a revolt against Chinese oppressors in which 36 leaders were women. He mentions Prince Tran Hung Dao, one of Vietnam's greatest generals who defeated the Mongols in 1285 and 1287. The final reference names Le Loi, Vietnam's emperor from 1428 to 1433, who waged war against China's Ming Empire.)
7. As a starting point, maybe, Norman Bowker might then have listed the seven medals he did win: the Combat Infantryman's Badge, the

Air Medal, the Army Commendation Medal, the Good Conduct Medal, the Vietnam Campaign Medal, the Bronze Star, and the Purple Heart, though it wasn't much of a wound and did not leave a scar and did not hurt and never had. ("Speaking of Courage," p. 141)

(The only military medal lacking a red, white, and blue color theme, the Purple Heart was commissioned in 1782 by George Washington to honor casualties. In 1932, the military began issuing the familiar heart shape on a purple ribbon edged in white. At the center of a gold heart, George Washington's bust on a black background highlighted by double olive branches symbolizes leadership and peace.)

8. In his sophomore year at Mount Sebastian College he had signed up for the Reserve Officer Training Corps without much thought. ("In the field," p. 167)
(ROTC began with the Land-Grant College Act of 1862. After the Civil War, educational institutions received land to train students part-time as military leaders. Based on a similar British system, ROTC stresses discipline and leadership. In 1916, the National Defense Act modernized the program and provided 43% of all U.S. officers in World War I.)
9. When a man died, there had to be blame. Jimmy Cross understood this. ("In the Field," p. 177)
(A cerebral leader, Cross is unable to shake a flood of regret that he bivouacked Alpha Company in an indefensible field covered in muck. He runs through a list of reasons for Kiowa's death—war, Kiowa himself, rain, river, field, mud, climate, enemy, mortars—then shifts the blame to people at home who don't read the news, tire of body counts and politics, profiteer by making munitions, or fail to vote. He ponders the blame of whole nations, God, and Karl Marx, founder of communism.)
10. For the most part she'd held up well—far better than I—and over the first two weeks she'd trooped along without complaint as we hit the obligatory tourist stops. Ho Chi Minh's mausoleum in Hanoi. ("Field Trip," p. 182)
(O'Brien's evocative chapter heading characterizes Kathleen's first encounter with Vietnam as though it were an educational expedition. The trip to the field by Song Tra Bong brings to life his memories of the bivouac that cost Kiowa his life, set Norman Bowker on a downward spiral to suicide, and deflated Lt. Cross's self-confidence as a leader. Most tourists preferred more enlightening sights, such as the tomb of Ho Chi Minh, founder and first president of North Vietnam.)

Comprehension Study

Answer the following questions in your own words. There is not always a right answer. Your judgment is important and you should be ready to defend your answers with quotations from the novel.

Motivation

1. What causes the men of Alpha Company to seek entertainment?

(In a constant state of tension, the men of Alpha Company endure wet, miserable conditions and a lack of hot food and cleanliness on extended patrols into enemy territory. Unable to drop their guard, they relish moments of inappropriate humor and entertainment, such as playing checkers, removing a thumb from a corpse, shaking hands with a dead man, and ridiculing human remains cooked to a crisp with napalm. Fun time carries its penalties: Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk carry a personal tiff too far; Curt Lemon, the braggart soldier, is enjoying a game of catch with a flare grenade when he trips an explosive and blows to pieces.

When the men return to battalion headquarters after weeks in the field, they find Tim O'Brien recovering from his buttocks wound. Still retreating to rub his bottom with yellow salve, he attempts to share in their late-night war stories, but finds himself excluded because he no longer performs hazardous duty. He views Barbarella at the movies, but humorous sci-fi cinema fails to amuse him or deter him from joining Azar in a cruel prank against Bobby Jorgenson, whom O'Brien blames for poor medical care that nearly caused him to die of shock. The joke gets so far out of hand that O'Brien plots with Jorgenson to retaliate against Azar.

On return home, the survivors continue seeking respite from harsh memories of sorrow, terror, and loss. Norman Bowker's casual drive round and round Slater Park and his viewing of Fourth of July fireworks bring him no relief from rootlessness and emotional distress. Tim O'Brien, his buddy and confidante turned war author, writes to rid himself of memory, but is unable to report the core terror that refuses to give the men a reprieve from the war. In his mid-40s, O'Brien and his daughter Kathleen become tourists in Vietnam, but, unlike Kathleen, he cannot enjoy the usual attractions because of his need to expiate the sadness and regret that his buddy Kiowa died ignobly in a foul swamp.)

Setting

2. Describe the Special Forces hootch.
(O'Brien invests the Green Berets with a mystique that Rat Kiley characterizes as "Animals . . . but far from social." At the unmi-

itary outpost where soldiers function without adequate discipline, the commandos, "secretive and suspicious," occupy a distant billet apart from the volleyball court, movies, card games, and drinking sessions that amuse the other soldiers. When Rat Kiley and Eddie Diamond approach the hootch to determine the source of female singing and chanting in a foreign tongue, they find candles and incense burning on the floor and hear chimes, drums, and bamboo flutes.

A closer inspection of the "Greenies" and their fetid quarters reveals a decaying leopard head and human bones beneath a poster urging "Assemble Your Own Gook." In the gloom, the commandos lounge in hammocks and cots, but say nothing to the intruders. Heightening the horror of trained-to-kill Special Forces and their private lair is Mary Anne's appetite to "eat this place," her urge to absorb the dirt and death of Vietnam to satisfy an unnatural delight in atavism. Her fiancé can only describe her as "Lost.")

Character Development

3. How does war change O'Brien?

(At age 21, Tim O'Brien, a bright college student and Phi Beta Kappan, is well "versed in the political differences between conservative hawks and liberal war protesters. He knows the significance of major players—General Westmoreland, LBJ, Abbie Hoffman, Jane Fonda, and Martin Luther King, Jr. O'Brien rids his mind of the possibility of draft until confronted with orders, which arrive in the mail. A precipitous six days away from home fail to rid him of the dilemma he faces. Rather than embarrass himself and his family by asking for a conscientious objector status or by fleeing to Winnipeg, he fights his first battle internally and, weeping openly, forces himself to become a soldier.

At first taste of infantry life, O'Brien retreats from battlefield cruelty and the mockery of a corpse. He becomes an observer of the other men's amusements and idiosyncrasies. After a second wound takes him away from Alpha Company's prowls of the countryside, he despairs at a mounting mean streak that distances him from his old self. Unforgiving to the point of sadism, he inveigles Azar into a plot to terrorize Bobby Jorgenson with flares, sandbags on pulleys, and sounds during his night guard duty. Even after O'Brien and Jorgenson end their enmity, O'Brien displaces his cruelty onto Azar, whom he suggests killing.)

Historical Milieu

4. How does the war and its aftermath affect Americans?

(The Vietnam War polarizes Americans. Older, politically conservative adults degrade young men who refuse to go to Vietnam and who protest the illegal warfare that has escalated beyond rational explanation. The sneers and jingoism of loyal Minnesotans echo in O'Brien's head as he tries to reason the correct path he should take. Aiding him during a comfortless with-

drawal to the Tip Top Lodge on Rainy River is Elroy Berdahl, an octogenarian who says nothing, but correctly interprets the signs that another young man is contemplating flight from military responsibility to his country.

When Alpha Company's survivors return home, they take no comfort in their performance or medals. Norman Bowker, the most overtly traumatized, is unable to sink back into middle-class comfort, talk candidly about the war, hold a job, or return to school. In confidence to O'Brien, he writes, "That night when Kiowa got wasted, I sort of sank down into the sewage with him." O'Brien recognizes that Norman "[jumps] from self-pity to anger to irony to guilt to a kind of feigned indifference."

Separated from a face-to-face encounter, Norman sums up the post-war let-down. He acknowledges that civilians hesitate to speak openly about his experience. Unlike "those whiner-vets," he rejects parades and "patriotic idiots who don't know jack about what it feels like to kill people or get shot at or sleep in the rain or watch your buddy go down underneath the mud." In the final paragraph, Norman states the worst aspect of the post-war gloom—"I can't figure out what exactly to say.")

Theme

5. What does the author reveal about memory?
(For men like Tim O'Brien, going to war is a torment that refines and matures their view of life, death, violence, and unfairness. As the spokesman for Alpha Company and a whole generation of uprooted young people, he treasures memory as the only salvation for fellow post-war emotional cripples. Despite the cost to his own sanity, he forces himself deeper into storytelling—beyond objectivity to a personal involvement that causes him to turn himself into a fictional character—an actor on the stage of Vietnam.)

In the surprising melange of feelings, vignettes, and dreamscapes that arise in text, O'Brien looks back on "Timmy," his youthful, naive self, and realizes how hard the author O'Brien is trying to save O'Brien as a child. Through stories, the refinement of memory into narrative becomes the all-important effort to dignify men who died in terrible cataclysms and ridiculous circumstances—Ted Lavender still zipping his pants from going to the brush to urinate, Curt Lemon shredded into pieces and flung into a tree, Kiowa downed in a mucky field, Lee Strunk bereft of his right leg and dying in a helicopter, and Norman Bowker, the survivor whose psyche is too damaged to thrive in peacetime. O'Brien enlarges on loss to encompass all of life and re-embraces Linda, his childhood friend who died of cancer over a decade before the war. He honors storytelling as a human salvation, a means of expressing the inexpressible to give it purpose and to strengthen the living for their own encounter with death.)

Interpretation

6. What does the novel say about war?

(Tim O'Brien's novel goes beyond the usual string of war stories to account for a kind of holy camaraderie among the men of Alpha Company. A Phi Beta Kappan derailed from his intent to finish an education, he is brighter than most and more contemplative than the jokers and scrappers of his outfit. As though reporting from the front, he notes the details of gradual spiritual disintegration—Kiowa's obsession with Ted Lavender's hard fall to earth "like cement," Curt Lemon's insistence that the dentist pull a healthy tooth, and Mark Fossie's acceptance that Mary Anne has lost her humanity during extensive night stalks with the Green Berets.)

The novel refuses to let combat die in O'Brien. As he advances from objective reportage to personal interview and honest storytelling, the demands of truth force him deeper into the strangeness of events that bring out the best and worst in his companions. He confronts the "purest black you could imagine. . . the kind of clock-stopping black that God must've had in mind when he sat down to invent blackness." No longer objectifying other men's faults and quirks, he relives his own internal hell "[worrying] about getting cut off from the rest of the unit—alone, you'd think—and then the real panic would bang in and you'd reach out and try to touch the guy in front of you."

*With atypical understatement, O'Brien admits to "some bad dreams" and his reduction to manageable terms the crude pranks, victimization of villagers, drug-taking, suicide games, and Kiley's intentional shot to the foot. Trading personal experience in war for a long-ago viewing of *The Man Who Never Was*, O'Brien reaches into the past to end a terror that plagued him from his first experience with death. Liberated from childhood's fear of loss, he begins summarizing the soldiers' "ways of making the dead seem not quite so dead.")*

Conflict

7. Why do the men of Alpha Company grow callous toward loss?

(The defense mechanisms that allow soldiers to function must first negate death. At grisly scenes of villagers crisped from napalm and soldiers' remains wrapped in ponchos for the chopper ride away from combat, the survivors must cope with "the burden of being alive." Part of their suffering is guilt over being glad that someone else died. Still clinging to life, they test out its outer limits of humor, grotesquerie, and mockery of death. In cavalier pose, they shake hands with a corpse, laugh at the "Lemon Tree," enjoy the shelter of a pagoda, and recall Lavender still zipping his fly as he falls to the earth like cement.)

When O'Brien loses his innocence and becomes one with the combat veterans, he recognizes his own baseness. After 3:00 A. M., as he and Azar operate the sandbags on pulleys and set off flares, O'Brien reads the mind of Jorgenson, his fellow dehu-

manized comrade. "Together we understood what terror was: you're not human anymore. You're a shadow." Stripped of compassion, O'Brien feels himself "molting, shedding your own history and your own future, leaving behind everything you ever were or wanted or believed in.")

Atmosphere

8. How do mist and silence spook men on patrol?

(At a listening post in the mountains, where men spend a week lying low and observing enemy troop movement, the unfamiliar territory and strict silence play on their minds. Deep in the bush in full camouflage, they vegetate in hiding in a spooky locale cloaked in clouds and mist. Mitchell Sanders characterizes it as being disembodied, "You just go with the vapors—the fog sort of takes you in.")

Worsening the isolation and terror of being sucked into the murk are unidentifiable sounds caroming about the countryside. Mitchell exaggerates the echoes into chanting, Radio Hanoi, opera, chamber music, and barbershop quartet. Because the "poor dudes can't horse around like normal," he and his comrades internalize fear, allowing it to grow so out of proportion that, after calling in a strike force to bomb the area, they return to base camp, look blank, and "don't say diddly." In Mitchell's opinion, "the whole war is right there in that stare.")

Author Purpose

9. How does O'Brien make himself into a character?

(The creation of metafiction through the merger of self into a fictional character is a valuable tool for O'Brien. By investing his fictional persona with his experiences and feelings, he can tap true responses as only he can remember them. Although he interviews others and incorporates their war stories within the whole, it is O'Brien's self-study that turns the novel into an experiment in point of view.

The unusual factor in O'Brien's characterization is his expansion of the O'Brien character through imaginary events and details. He makes up the week on the Rainy River with Elroy Berdahl and gives himself a daughter, Kathleen, the prompter who forces him to confess that he did kill. The finished novel begs the question of how much is experience and how much is engineered from others' memories. O'Brien moves well in his surreal world of inexplicable combat events. For closure, he brings himself home to Timmy, the grade-school child learning to accept the death of his friend Linda.)

Comparative Literature

10. How does *The Things They Carried* compare with classic war literature?

(Tim O'Brien's novel shares much in common with the best of

war fiction. Like Hector and Achilles in Homer's *Iliad*, an epic from the Trojan War, O'Brien's men gain stature from expressing their finer nature. Like the maturity of German schoolboys in Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, the refinement of neophytes into soldiers carries the price of suffering and loss and periods of introspection separating self from the melange of human passions that mingle in a foxhole. On a par with the American fleeing Italian command in Ernest Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, O'Brien's book juxtaposes noble behaviors with inane stunts, happenstance, and inept command.

In late 20th-century war literature, more realistic writers approach O'Brien's understanding of the truth in combat stories. Like the black foot soldiers in Walter Dean Myer's *Fallen Angels*, O'Brien's characters develop a camaraderie and a tenuous truce with conscience. In the style of Winnie Smith's *American Daughter Gone to War*, the text discloses psyches so torn and maimed by bloodshed that healing is a far-off goal too removed from the present to offer hope of sanity or relief from flashbacks.)

How Language Works

Through dialogue, Tim O'Brien offers small glimpses of people who share his combat experience.

1. The kind Buddhist monks who welcome the unit to their pagoda reach out to Henry Dobbins with gentle gestures and words intended to welcome, "Soldier Jesus . . . good soldier Jesus."
2. In her effort to summarize distaste for the Song Tra Bong area, Kathleen O'Brien reaches for words equal to the foul odor: "I think this place stinks. It smells like . . . God, I don't even know what. It smells rotten."
3. Still searching for descriptors at home, veteran Norman Bowker halts from driving round the neighborhood and addresses a tinny voice on the intercom with a false start at unburdening himself, "Well, . . . how'd you like to hear about—"
4. Bereft of the verbal tools to unlock experience, Norman thinks to himself that the story of Kiowa's death is untellable—"A good war story . . . but it was not a war for war stories, nor for talk of valor, and nobody in town wanted to know about the terrible stink."

5. Elroy Berdahl, who skirts confronting the demons that torment Tim O'Brien, jovially admits that the boy reeks of the pig plant and comments, "Smelled like you was awful damned fond of pork chops."
6. From experience in combat, Tim O'Brien realizes the hell of war, but must also acknowledge contradictions: "War is nasty; war is fun. War is thrilling; war is drudgery. War makes you a man; war makes you dead."
7. He moves over remembered terrain like a student learning a lesson and explains pedantically, "I lost the natural counterpoint between the lake and the field. A metaphoric unity was broken. What the piece needed, and did not have, was the terrible killing power of that shit field."
8. In the end, O'Brien recognizes the stages of his own coming to knowledge and accepts "Tim trying to save Timmy's life with a story."

Across the Curriculum

Art

1. Create a bulletin board contrasting settings at Chataqua Park, Danang, Saigon, Oklahoma City, Slater Park, My Khe, Cleveland, South China Sea, Than Khe, Chu Lai, Butangan Peninsula, Quang Ngai Province, Hanoi, L.A., Cu Chi, Tri Binh, Bangkok, Winnipeg, Japan, Rainy River, and Worthington, Minnesota.
2. Design contrasting murals or posters to demonstrate these pairs: pantyhose and checkers, M-16s and Hueys, tunnels and bivouacs, chants and mountain mist, medics and Special Forces, monks and point walkers, a star-shaped wound and smoke grenades.
3. With a group, design a brochure, web site, frieze, or poster series illustrating relationships between people of different races. What do the soldiers have to share with the Vietnamese villagers and American women? What system of relieving anxiety might work better than pranks, checkers, grenade games, and talismans like a New Testament, pantyhose, photos, letters, and good luck charms?

4. Draw a montage or mural detailing uniforms, weapons, artillery, equipment, hospitals, and transportation during the Vietnam War. Include Special Forces, medical workers, enemy soldiers, monks, and Vietnamese civilians as well as infantry.
5. List books, stories, movies, videos, art, sculpture, dance, song, and other creativity that depict soldiers' faces as they perform a miserable job, for example, articles on prisoners of war.

Cinema

Summarize aloud the attitude of several screenwriters of movies about the Vietnam War. Consider *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Charlie Company*, *The Killing Fields*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Coming Home*, and *Good Morning, Vietnam*. Contrast several plots with Tim O'Brien's approach to war themes and situations, for example, accepting a first kill, preparing a friend's body for evacuation by helicopter, taking an easy job away from danger, and recovering from wounds.

Drama

1. Improvise a scene in which O'Brien returns to his old Worthington neighborhood or tells Kathleen of his adventures in the army. What might he warn the innocent about military service and combat? What details might he keep from wife and family?
2. Role-play the part of a doctor, nurse, farmer, officer, ARVN soldier, chopper pilot, chaplain, Red Cross volunteer, corpsman, or rehabilitation counselor. Explain how the story would change if Kiowa had survived.

Economics

1. Create a non-combat military job for men like Cross and Azar who need a break from sorrow, fear, and regret. Put their experiences to use, for example, in writing news from the front or preparing recruits, Huey pilots, and young medics for their first encounter with firefights.
2. Total in columns the year-by-year expenditures for the Vietnam War, including post-war counseling, medical care, prostheses, and rehabilitation.

Geography

1. Draw a Venn diagram or cause-and-effect chart explaining why soldiers locate specific coordinates on a war map. What is the purpose of listening posts and "recon"? How can troops accidentally kill their own if maps are incorrect?
2. Explain in a chalk talk the types of terrain that pose the greatest advantage for bivouac, night patrol, moving troops in mist, planting booby traps, ambush, tunneling, recovering the dead, and landing helicopters.
3. Compose a tour guide of Vietnam. Explain why tourists visit Ho Chi Minh's tomb, tunnels at Cu Chi, and combat zones at Khe Sanh.

Health and First Aid

1. Make an oral report on post-traumatic shock syndrome. Why do military and medical personnel of the Vietnam war still suffer flashbacks, bouts of alcoholism and drug addiction, attempted suicide, and paranoia as a result of their involvement? What strategies and treatments bring the most lasting relief?
2. Using charts of the human circulatory system, explain why medics must check the wounded for shock.
3. Make a chart of advice to rookies concerning first aid in the field. Name items useful in saving lives, for example, compresses, tourniquets, and pain killers.

History and Social Studies

1. Write a theme, create a web site, or sketch a flow chart describing the different levels of command and the responsibilities each officer has to guard the soldiers and to accomplish the war objective. Make a separate presentation on the medical hierarchy, which moves from first aid to medic, evacuation pilot, nurse, and surgeon.
2. Divide the class into small groups to discuss these questions:
 - How did Jane Fonda endanger U. S. morale? How was her visit to North Vietnam unlike the public reaction to the escalation of the Vietnam War or the My Lai massacre?

- How did the Vietnam War differ from combat in other U.S. wars?
 - What influence did Abbie Hoffman and Martin Luther King, Jr., have on war protest and draft evasion?
3. Summarize in a chalk talk the influence of the Geneva Accord on modern warfare.
 4. Make an oral report on the limited role of nurses and other women in Vietnam. Suggest why O'Brien creates Mary Anne Bell and causes her to join night patrols and eventually disappear.
 5. Create lessons in field command. Draw on the strategies of famous leaders such as Hannibal and Patton.

Journalism

1. Compose a list of questions to accompany a televised interview with soldiers in a war zone. Balance questions and answers to give civilians a fair, unbiased view of day-to-day activities and combat demands, including grim details and moments of relaxation and humor, such as practical jokes and skinny dipping.
2. Discuss in an editorial why dink, cooze, gook, and bleeding heart are equally offensive.
3. Explain what O'Brien means by "puffery."
4. Discuss in a brief report the psychological affirmation of *Stars and Stripes*.

Language Arts

1. Read aloud passages that capture a single negative feeling. Add details that express how these feelings linger and haunt the men of Alpha Company. Why do the men speak hesitatingly about loss, friendship, and sad moments?
2. Read or listen to an audio cassette of Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*. Compare Henry to O'Brien in terms of fears, inadequacies, self-knowledge, and courage. What do both young men learn best by experience? Describe the scenes in which each discovers what Crane calls "the great death."

- Using incidents from the book, comment on gradual changes in the speaker. Contrast Tim O'Brien the author with Timmy, the boy mentioned in the last sentence. Explain how O'Brien the writer fragments himself to describe Tim the soldier protecting Timmy the boy.
- Prepare and illustrate a gazetteer of terms from the Vietnam War. Include abbreviations, slang, and military terms.
- Draw up a contrasting list of elements that characterize patrols. Enumerate general pieces of advice for rookies, such as cleaning and loading a weapon, following orders, staying with the unit, observing silence and total darkness, staying dry, and remaining alert, especially in the dark.
- Write a poem, combat slogan, or the lyrics to a song or hymn in which you express the frustration of men fighting a dirty war that American citizens don't support. Compare your lyrics to those of popular American music from the late 1960s and 1970s.
- Characterize in a theme the ironic or ominous implications of a lieutenant named Cross, a town named Worthington, the Rainy River, the Tip Top Lodge, and a girl named Bell.
- Write an encyclopedia entry on infantry. Add details that explain the importance of the individual fighter to a massive endeavor, such as invasion, conquest, revolution, pacification, or reclamation.

Psychology

- Discuss in a short speech the effects of psychological warfare on American forces and the Viet Cong. What physical and mental symptoms demonstrate the effects of night sounds?
- Explain why a sensitive writer like O'Brien chooses to objectify his subjects rather than express a painful, self-revelatory truth.
- Make a web site or bulletin board characterizing attitudes toward COs, AWOLs, Buddhist monks, Special Forces, and women in the mili-

tary. Why are race, gender, and personal beliefs significant issues among soldiers?

- Compose a lecture on dealing with the death of a soldier or the suicide of a veteran. Suggest ways that families can relieve sorrow and loss, for example, by honoring Ted Lavender, Kiowa, Curt Lemon, the young Vietnamese victim, or Norman Bowker with a special service or public monument.
- Explain the last sentence. From what is Tim rescuing Timmy?

Alternate Assessment

- List examples of cruelty, vulgarity, and racism in various characters.
- Compile a list of actions that demonstrate alienation, particularly Norman Bowker's ongoing drive around Slater Park.
- Compose a scene in which Lt. Cross reunites with the survivors of Alpha Company. Show how each veteran honors the dead in memory and anecdote.
- Make a character list and explain the character flaws of each.
- Account for dual meanings in these symbolic elements: Rainy River, the declotting gun, "Lemon Tree," rain dance, shit field, Worthington, *Barbarella*, and *The Man Who Never Was*.

Vocabulary

Complete each of the following sentences by underlining an appropriate word from the list in each line.

- On their way back up to the compound she stopped for a swim in the Song Tra Bong, stripping down to her underwear, showing off her legs while Fossie tried to explain to her about things like ambushes and snipers and the stopping power of an **(AWOL, AK-47, R&R, HE, EM club)**.
- I was riding on **(defoliant, carotene, protoplasm, banyan, adrenaline)**. A giddy feeling, in a way, except there was the dreamy edge of impossibility to it—like running a dead-end maze—no way out—it couldn't come to a happy conclusion and yet I was doing it anyway because it was all I could think of to do.
- He drove past Slater Park and across the **(SEATO, rapport, causeway, bandolier, fragmentation)** and past Sunset Park.
- They would check for casualties, call in **(dustoffs, Sousa, strobe, grunts, VC)**, light cigarettes, try to smile, clear their throats and spit and begin cleaning their weapons.
- In the late afternoon yesterday, when they reached the night **(pentrite, deferment, recon, coordinates, CID)**, he should've taken one look and headed for higher ground.
- For the most part she'd held up well—far better than I—and over the first two weeks she'd trooped along without complaint as we hit the obligatory tourist stops. Ho Chi Minh's **(mausoleum, papa-san, scrambler, platitude, gentry)** in Hanoi. A model farm outside Saigon. The tunnels at Cu Chi.
- It was ghost country, and **(Huey, Audie Murphy, Psy Ops, Charlie Cong, The Man Who Never Was)** was the main ghost.
- I'll never be certain, of course, but I think he meant to bring me up against the realities, to guide me across the river and to take me to the edge and to stand a kind of **(magazine, vigil, AO, recon, deferment)** as I chose a life for myself.
- They walk **(napalm, Cisco, LBJ, Tonkin, piaster)** up and down the ridges. They bring in the Cobras and F-4s, they use Willie Peter and HE and incendiaries. It's all fire.
- There was a topmost scent of **(encyst, talisman, joss, ARVN, SOP)** sticks and incense, like the fumes of some exotic smokehouse, but beneath the smoke lay a deeper and much more powerful stench.
- Tim, it's a war. The guy wasn't **(Bouncing Betty, Heidi, Smith & Wesson, Chi-Com, Uzi)**—he had a weapon, right?
- By telling stories, you **(counterpoint, maul, hallucinate, trick-or-treat, objectify)** your own experience. You separate it from yourself.
- Because the nights were cold, and because the **(claymore, monsoons, differentials, C rations, RTO)** were wet, each carried a green plastic poncho that could be used as a raincoat or groundsheet or makeshift tent.
- When someone died, it wasn't quite dying, because in a curious way it seemed scripted, and because they had their lines mostly memorized, irony mixed with tragedy, and because they called it by other names, as if to **(restrain, hump, muzzle down, appropriate, digress)** and destroy the reality of death itself.
- If they needed fresh bodies, why not draft some back-to-the-stone-age hawk? Or some dumb **(Stars and Stripes, Phi Beta Kappa, Diem, jingo, Green Beret)** in his hard hat and Bomb Hanoi button, or one of LBJ's pretty daughters, or Westmoreland's whole handsome family—nephews and nieces and baby grandson.

Comprehension Test A

Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

Match each of the following descriptions from the novel with a character name. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- | | |
|---|--------------------|
| _____ 1. asks if O'Brien killed anyone. | A. Kiowa |
| _____ 2. helps O'Brien place flares and ropes to terrorize the medic. | B. Tim O'Brien |
| _____ 3. objectifies war stories. | C. Mary Anne Bell |
| _____ 4. steps from shade into sunlight as he trips an explosive. | D. Curt Lemon |
| _____ 5. fears a pact will cost him his life. | E. Azar |
| _____ 6. watches Fourth of July fireworks. | F. Lee Strunk |
| _____ 7. turns on a flashlight shortly before dying. | G. Elroy Berdahl |
| _____ 8. takes O'Brien fishing. | H. Linda |
| _____ 9. becomes a missionary to Ethiopia. | I. Ted Lavender |
| _____ 10. gradually earns Alpha Company's respect as a medic. | J. Bobby Jorgenson |
| _____ 11. learns to clamp arteries and go on night ambush. | K. Kathleen |
| _____ 12. goes skinny-dipping and is afflicted with polio. | L. Henry Dobbins |
| _____ 13. forces Azar to stop mocking a dance. | M. Morty Phillips |
| _____ 14. hides stitches on the skull. | N. Martha |
| _____ 15. dies after urinating. | O. Norman Bowker |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

Mark the following statements either T for true or F if any part is false.

- _____ 1. Lt. Jimmy Cross sours on war after Kiowa's death and burns Martha's photo and letters out of respect.
- _____ 2. O'Brien sends a copy of his first book to Norman to help him cope with trauma.
- _____ 3. Sally Kramer's marriage depresses O'Brien, who withdraws into writing about a dead Vietnamese youth with a star-shaped hole in his skull.
- _____ 4. After a second wound, O'Brien draws an assignment in supply.
- _____ 5. Alpha Company has difficulty leveling ground for the dustoff that carries Curt Lemon away.
- _____ 6. The rucksack, moccasins, and New Testament are the only artifacts the men find in the field by the Song Tra Bong River.
- _____ 7. By crossing Rainy River, Elroy risks arrest for helping a man evade the draft.
- _____ 8. Norman's father fails to appreciate his son's valor and post-war torment.
- _____ 9. Walking point is a dangerous post for members of night patrol.
- _____ 10. Lt. Cross conceals Kiley's deliberate self-mutilation.

Comprehension Test A (Page 2)

Part III: Completion (20 points)

Fill in the blanks below with a word or phrase which completes the sentence. Place your answer in the space provided at left.

1. Alpha Company searches out a _____ complex at Than Khe, where _____ draws the losing number.
2. Mark Fossie and _____ spend two weeks in a bunker near the _____, who remain to themselves in their hootch.
3. _____ executes Lavender's _____ by triggering an explosive.
4. Working as a _____ at a meatpacking plant in Worthington, Minnesota, O'Brien longs to flee to _____, Canada.
5. Kiley writes to Curt's _____ about his _____, but receives no reply.

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Describe how O'Brien passes six days at the Tip Top Lodge.
2. Give reasons for pranks, swearing, and inappropriate humor among soldiers.
3. Discuss the kind of truth that O'Brien wants for his war stories.
4. Account for the returning company's inability to report strange music to the colonel.
5. Summarize events that O'Brien relives as a tourist in Vietnam.

Comprehension Test B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

Select the phrase that completes each of the following sentences. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

_____ 1. At the battalion supply section,

- A. Azar kills a puppy.
- B. O'Brien smears on yellow ointment.
- C. an old man leads Alpha Company through a mine field.
- D. burned bodies appear to kneel and shake hands.

_____ 2. The truth of war

- A. causes O'Brien to become cruel and vindictive toward Azar.
- B. makes Cross regret joining ROTC and killing a young man on dawn patrol.
- C. forces O'Brien to lie to Kathleen about the moccasins.
- D. is difficult to put into stories for civilians to read.

_____ 3. The pantyhose

- A. retain their magic after the girl abandons the soldier.
- B. become a talisman to protect Curt Lemon on night ambush.
- C. remain in the Special Forces hootch.
- D. are the only clue the CID can find to Mary Anne's disappearance.

_____ 4. As the company moves out,

- A. they burn more villages than necessary.
- B. they dump burned villagers in the well.
- C. planes begin spreading napalm along the field where Kiowa died.
- D. Lt. Cross enforces silence.

_____ 5. Bobby Jorgenson fails

- A. to understand gut hate.
- B. at wrapping Lavender in his poncho.
- C. during his first firefight.
- D. to watch for trip wires.

_____ 6. On the flight to Japan,

- A. Lee Strunk dies of a leg injury.
- B. Rat Kiley abandons a war that threatened to kill him.
- C. Kathleen questions O'Brien about his weirdness.
- D. Eddie Diamond comes under MP scrutiny for having a woman at the aid station.

_____ 7. The filth of the field

- A. haunts O'Brien as he writes a letter to Kiowa's father.
- B. fills O'Brien's first novel.
- C. creates a stench that remains when Kathleen visits with her father.
- D. derives from the baby water buffalo the men torture.

_____ 8. At 43, O'Brien

- A. wonders why Strunk's sister failed to return his letter.
- B. drops his vendetta against Jorgenson.
- C. looks at the deaths he feared to contemplate during war.
- D. writes a story about Norman's Fourth of July suicide at the YMCA.

_____ 9. Rainy River

- A. offers O'Brien a view of freedom from the draft.
- B. separates Alpha Company from the polio virus.
- C. conceals ARVN soldiers advancing toward the aid station.
- D. echoes with musical sounds of unknown origin.

_____ 10. Lt. Cross regrets

- A. the difficulty O'Brien has in recovering from a shrapnel wound to the buttocks.
- B. assigning Curt Lemon to walk point.
- C. the absence of parades to honor veterans from his company.
- D. not picking Martha up and carrying her to his room.

Comprehension Test B (Page 2)

Part I: Matching (30 points)

Match the following actions with characters from the list below. Place the letter of your response in the blank provided at left.

- | | |
|--|---------------------|
| _____ 1. carries old moccasins back to Vietnam | A. Kiowa |
| _____ 2. believes O'Brien is weird | B. Tim O'Brien |
| _____ 3. hugs O'Brien at the helipad | C. Mary Anne Bell |
| _____ 4. repeatedly describes Lavender's fall | D. Curt Lemon |
| _____ 5. prefers not to marry | E. Azar |
| _____ 6. cleans O'Brien's head wound | F. monks |
| _____ 7. fails at jobs and a return to school | G. Elroy Berdahl |
| _____ 8. wears a necklace of tongues | H. Rat Kiley |
| _____ 9. insists on paying O'Brien | I. Mitchell Sanders |
| _____ 10. breaks Lee Strunk's nose | J. Bobby Jorgenson |
| _____ 11. watches <i>Barbarella</i> with O'Brien | K. Kathleen |
| _____ 12. fears dental work | L. Dave Jensen |
| _____ 13. serve watermelon and clean rifles | M. Morty Phillips |
| _____ 14. considers O'Brien's prank a sick joke | N. Martha |
| _____ 15. skinny dips. | O. Norman Bowker |

Part III: Short Answer (20 points)

Supply a word or phrase in answer to the following questions. Place your response in the blank provided.

- _____ 1. Who refuses to shake hands with a corpse?
- _____ 2. Who dreams of having women come to the aid station?
- _____ 3. What does Elroy write on the envelope?
- _____ 4. Who despises conservatives for not informing themselves about the war?
- _____ 5. What award does Norman Bowker regret not receiving?
- _____ 6. Who proposes scaring Azar to death?
- _____ 7. What story does O'Brien write in 1975?
- _____ 8. What career does Henry Dobbins admire for offering a free house and car?
- _____ 9. Who vanish for weeks, then magically reappear?
- _____ 10. What changes O'Brien's life on June 17, 1968?

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Choose two and answer in complete sentences.

1. Explain why true war stories compel O'Brien to write.
2. Contrast the job of patrol with that of supply clerk.
3. Account for O'Brien's cruel streak and his obsession with the young man he killed.
4. Summarize events that victimize Vietnamese civilians.
5. Describe the types of humor that help men cope with death.

Answer Key

VOCABULARY

- | | | |
|----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| 1. AK-47 | 6. mausoleum | 11. Heidi |
| 2. adrenaline | 7. Charlie Cong | 12. objectify |
| 3. causeway | 8. vigil | 13. monsoons |
| 4. dustoffs | 9. napalm | 14. appropriate |
| 5. coordinates | 10. joss | 15. jingo |

COMPREHENSION TEST A

Part I: Character Identification (30 points)

- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. K | 6. O | 11. C |
| 2. E | 7. A | 12. M |
| 3. B | 8. G | 13. L |
| 4. D | 9. N | 14. H |
| 5. F | 10. J | 15. I |

Part II: True/False (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. F | 6. F |
| 2. F | 7. F |
| 3. F | 8. T |
| 4. T | 9. T |
| 5. T | 10. T |

Part III: Completion (20 points)

- tunnel, Lee Strunk
- Mary Anne Bell, Special Forces
- Azar, puppy
- declotter, Winnipeg
- sister, death

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.

COMPREHENSION TEST B

Part I: Multiple Choice (20 points)

- | | |
|------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. B |
| 2. D | 7. C |
| 3. A | 8. C |
| 4. D | 9. A |
| 5. C | 10. D |

Part II: Matching (30 points)

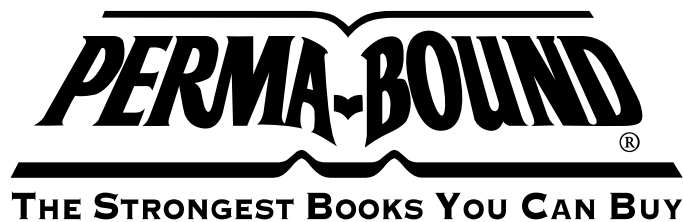
- | | | |
|------|-------|-------|
| 1. B | 6. J | 11. E |
| 2. K | 7. O | 12. D |
| 3. H | 8. C | 13. F |
| 4. A | 9. G | 14. I |
| 5. N | 10. L | 15. M |

Part III: Short Answer (20 points)

- | | |
|-------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1. O'Brien | 6. Jorgenson |
| 2. Mark Fossie | 7. "Speaking of Courage" |
| 3. emergency fund | 8. minister |
| 4. O'Brien | 9. Green Berets(Special Forces) |
| 5. Silver Star | 10. draft notice |

Part IV: Essay (30 points)

Answers will vary.



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