

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED
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INTRODUCTION

Tim O'Brien served in Vietnam with the 5th Battalion, 46th Infantry. I served with a so-called sister battalion, the 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, at about the same time. Although not located far apart in what was then northern South Vietnam, the two battalions had very different missions. The 5/46 was assigned, for the most part, the mission of controlling the heavily populated coastal area in Northern Quang Ngai province. The 1/46, during the entire time I was there, was located in the next Province to the north, Quang Tin province, in the mountains and jungle several miles inland from the coast. There were no roads or villages in that area. Everything came in and went out by helicopter. Our mission was primarily to disrupt the flow of enemy troops and supplies that came down from North Vietnam on the Ho Chi Minh Trail into Laos and then moved east through the mountains toward the populated coastal areas. In this area, unlike the area that O'Brien's unit worked, there were very, very few civilians and those who were there stayed well concealed for the most part, although they were certainly active in monitoring our movements and setting booby traps throughout the area. Our typical routine consisted of roughly three week long patrols of company and platoon strength followed by about a week back on our fire support base resting and providing perimeter security for the base, which was nothing more than a hilltop which served as the battalion headquarters and was the home of our artillery support. There were four rifle companies in the battalion, so three of the four were normally on patrol and the fourth would be on the fire base.

My reason for sharing that background is to highlight the fact that Americans who went to Vietnam had a wide variety of experiences. We served in a lot of different capacities in different settings, so I certainly don't profess to speak for all Vietnam veterans. What I can tell you a little about is one rifle company in one remote part of Vietnam.

I'd like to talk a little about some of the tangible things we carried and then move on to some of the intangibles carried while in Vietnam and after coming home.

THINGS CARRIED

In terms of the tangibles, we mostly carried only the absolute necessities since every ounce counted because it was all carried on our backs.

We wore jungle fatigues (a clean set was issued about once a month whether we needed them or not).

Jungle boots.

Steel helmet with liner, suspension and camouflage cover.

Web belt—attached to the belt were a one quart canteen, a compass in a canvas case, an ammunition pouch containing an Instamatic camera in a plastic bag (two fragmentation grenades were attached to the sides of that ammo pouch), another ammo pouch that actually contained a couple of magazines of ammunition (another fragmentation grenade and a smoke grenade were attached to the sides of that pouch), and a knife with a six inch blade in a sheath.

M-16 rifle.

20-25 magazines of M-16 ammunition, most of them carried draped over the shoulders in cloth bandoliers Poncho Villa style—eighteen rounds per magazine.

A belt of M-60 machine gun ammunition.

Towel—green of course, worn around the neck and used for wiping sweat. It also provided extra padding on the shoulders and, rolled up at night, it was used as a pillow.

Dog tags—one worn on a chain around the neck and one laced into one of my boots.

Luminescent watch.

Laminated topographical map folded to fit into the left cargo pocket of my fatigues.

Rucksack containing:

C-rations (3-5 days of meals when fully supplied).

There were a dozen or so delectable C-ration entrees to choose from like Chopped Ham & Eggs, Spaghetti, Beef with Potatoes & Gravy, and Beans with Frankfurter Chunks. There were also much prized cans of fruit cocktail, peaches, and pears plus an assortment of canned cakes, cookies, crackers, peanut butter, cheese spreads and jelly. C-rats also came with accessory packets which contained a plastic spoon, salt, pepper, instant coffee, sugar, toilet paper and a small pack of 4 cigarettes. Those of us who didn't smoke didn't give away or throw away those cigarettes. They were bargaining chips. There is nothing like a smoker, especially a stressed smoker, who runs out of cigarettes. For a few cigarettes, you could get those guys to give up all sorts of things that they otherwise cherished. You could get them to part with a can of fruit cocktail or maybe even that can of hot beer they'd been saving for just the right occasion. You could just about name your price if they were desperate enough.

A P38 can opener for opening the cans and heat tabs for heating the meals when time and conditions allowed.

Four more quart canteens attached to the exterior of the rucksack.

Poncho—used as a ground cloth or overhead shelter at night. We typically paired up to build a shelter at night. One person's poncho would be spread on the ground; the other would be tied 3 or 4 feet off the ground to serve as protection from rain.

Camouflage nylon poncho liner which served as a lightweight blanket and protection from mosquitoes.

Claymore antipersonnel mine with detonating device to put out in front of our position at night.

Trip flair taped to a tent stake that would be put out in front of the Claymore at night.

Rifle cleaning kit.

One pound block of C-4 explosive.

Insect repellant.

Personal items like a few sheets of writing paper, envelopes, and a pen for writing letters.

Small cylindrical corrugated container (the packing container for a hand grenade) containing a bar of soap, a razor, shaving cream, toothbrush, toothpaste, comb and a small polished metal mirror.

And then there were the personal items that various people carried. They were usually small items that had some connections to home and were often a gift from a loved one—maybe a religious symbol worn around the neck or some type of good luck charm. Those of you who've read the book know that Lt. Cross carried a pebble that Martha had sent him. Henry Dobbins carried his girlfriend's pantyhose wrapped around his neck. Dave Jensen carried a rabbit's foot, Kiowa carried moccasins and his grandfather's hatchet. Norman Bowker, an otherwise gentle person, carried a young man's thumb. And sometimes these things definitely worked. One of my friends, Baby-san Peterson, carried a special silver dollar in his wallet in one of his back pockets. In one particular battle, Peterson's squad was passing through a small clearing when the battalion commander's helicopter flew over the area. A nervous door gunner mistook the group for enemy soldiers and opened up on them with his machine gun. Roy Cordingley was shot in the stomach and permanently disabled, Don Montgomery and Real Paradise received minor wounds and Peterson, while trying to roll out of the line of fire, took a round in his

backside. And, yes, it struck the silver dollar. He was bruised, but otherwise uninjured. I didn't see that event first hand, but I know it happened because I joined that very same squad a couple of weeks later as one of the replacements for the casualties suffered during that battle. There was still a lot of chatter about Peterson's good luck. I did see, firsthand, the wallet with a bullet hole in it and the deformed silver dollar. Peterson came to be viewed by many as a good luck charm himself. The word was: "Stay close to Baby-san, you'll be okay."

There were the coveted care packages from home. These were priceless, especially the cookies and other treats that reminded us of home. It was customary to share treats like that with your fellow squad members. We didn't just devour those treats. We ate them slowly, savoring every bite. My Aunt Peg lived in Germany at the time and at one point sent me a tube of spicy German mustard. I'm not sure I shared much of that with the others. By mixing that mustard with certain C-ration meals I could take C-ration cuisine to a whole new level.

Lee Kaywork was a college graduate who was a little more sophisticated than most of us. He was an old guy—at least 22 or 23. Lee had somebody sending him small bottles of gin so that he could kick back and have a martini every night with his C-rations.

Letters from home were always welcome. You could NEVER receive too much mail. It was our lifeline to the "world" as we referred to home. Most of my mail was from family members, but one letter I received was from a girl I had gone to school with from the 7th grade through high school. She was in nursing school at the time. We'd been good friends and had even gone on a date once, so I wrote her back, but I never received a second letter from her. I didn't learn until years later that she didn't write back because she never received my letter for some reason, so she assumed that I had no interest in corresponding. I guess I have to trust her on that one. It all worked out in the long run though. Almost 12 years ago, 25 years after she wrote me that letter, I finally got around to marrying her.

A lot of guys carried photos—mostly photos of their families, their girlfriends, someone else's girlfriend, or, in some cases, of their wives and children. We'd take them out frequently and look at them and show them off to others. My friend Mario Gonzales was a proud father. He was so proud of his infant son that he must have shown me his picture at least a hundred times before he, Bruce Klingaman and Miguel Garcia were killed one night by one of our own artillery rounds. Bruce had shown me a new picture of his fiancé as we sat on the trail taking a break just a couple of hours before he died. He was scheduled to go home in just a few short weeks.

OTHER THINGS CARRIED DURING THE WAR

Fear—of being killed or, maybe even worse, from the perspective of a 20 year old, the fear of being maimed or horribly disfigured for life. Remember the pact made between Dave Jensen and Lee Strunk in the book? As a squad leader, there was the fear of

making a decision that would end up costing someone else their life. There was the fear of doing something or not doing something that would cause you to be viewed as a coward by your fellow soldiers. For those who were married or had left girlfriends at home there was the fear of the dreaded Dear John letter like the one received by Henry Dobbins. Unfortunately, those letters were received all too frequently. There was also fear of the jungle itself at times, especially at night. The jungle seemed to come alive at night. It was like all of the creatures that simply watched you pass by during the day, were on the move and communicating loudly at night. It could be a little unnerving. You simply hoped that the sounds you heard weren't caused by other armed men and that whatever else was moving around out there left you alone. For the most part, we kept all of our fears well concealed. As O'Brien wrote about the men of Alpha Company: "They were afraid of dying, but were even more afraid to show it." So we became emotionally numb and simply humped up and down the mountains one day at a time, hoping that each day would be a quiet one, but knowing full well that the jungle could erupt with gunfire at any moment.

Anger, Frustration, & Sadness—especially when someone would get hurt or killed or when we were ordered to do something that didn't make sense from our perspective and seemed to put us at risk unnecessarily. A lot of our casualties were from explosives triggered by trip wires stretched across trails. Having people get hurt in that manner was especially difficult and frustrating to deal with.

A Sense of Comfort—in knowing that there were people who would do everything humanly possible to help us if we were hurt or in trouble. There were the doctors and nurses in the hospitals, our medics who would be up and running toward the injured whenever called, helicopter crews who would fly through hostile fire and any kind of weather conditions, day or night, to retrieve the wounded or deliver more ammunition if needed. There were the artillery crews, gunship pilots, Marine and Air Force fighter-bomber pilots, and a lot of others who supported us in one way or another. Infantry soldiers held, and still hold, all of those people in high regard. Without them we couldn't have survived. To those of you who provided that support—Thank you!

OTHER THINGS CARRIED SINCE THE WAR

Sadness—I carry a profound sense of sadness when I think of all of the death and destruction and suffering that took place, and still takes place, as a result of our involvement in Vietnam. This is a copy of the registry of names on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington. 763 pages—over 58,000 names. Every one of these individuals had a family and friends and a life ahead of them. And this just represents the American dead. If we could publish a list of Vietnamese dead it would be, by various estimates, something like 35-50 volumes this size. War is a brutal and horrific endeavor and we need to make certain that we only send young men and women off to war as a VERY last resort.

Survivor Guilt—I know this is common from talking to a lot of other veterans. Anyone who has ever been in combat knows how chaotic it is and how random the chances of death and injury. When it's over and you're still alive and well, when others are dead or wounded, you're left feeling very, very humble. I can't help but think almost daily about all the things in life that I've been able to experience and enjoy that those lost never got the chance to experience and enjoy. Some non-veterans also carry survivor guilt. I've had several tell me that they feel some degree of guilt at receiving college deferments, or medical deferments, or even for joining the National Guard or Reserves to avoid Vietnam, knowing that some other person was then drafted instead.

Resentment—Even though I've let most of it go, I'd be less than honest if I didn't admit to still carrying a little lingering resentment toward the portion of our population who took out their frustration with the war in Vietnam on those who were sent to fight it. The negative stereotypes that somehow developed never did describe most of us and may have been as damaging to some as the war experience itself. The vast majority of us came home and tried to move on with our lives. We went to school or found jobs. Most of us got married, raised families and have simply tried to be good, solid citizens. Things HAVE changed over the years though. For example, you're now much more likely to see Vietnam veterans in positive roles in TV shows and movies. AND we now even have some non-veterans impersonating Vietnam veterans! None of us who lived through the sixties and seventies EVER thought that we'd see THAT happen. My sincere hope is that one of the enduring lessons learned from the war in Vietnam is that we must never again turn our backs on the people we send off to war even if we don't agree with the war in the first place or it doesn't turn out as intended. Men and women in the military don't decide when and where they'll be sent to fight. Elected officials make those decisions. Regardless of how you feel about current events, I would encourage you to reach out to the young men and women in uniform today. When you see them on the street or in an airport, approach them, shake their hand and simply thank them for serving. I guarantee it will mean a great deal to them. They need to have their service and sacrifice validated.

Memories—I mostly just carry memories now of that period in my life. I've probably filtered them somewhat, but many of those memories are of the men I lived in the jungle with for a year. I remember a group of very young men who, all in all, performed well in what was certainly a challenging environment. Some made better soldiers than others, but I'm proud of how every single member of my squad and platoon conducted themselves. Things didn't always go as planned. They never do in war. We had our disagreements and tensions ran high at times, but we recognized that we needed one another in order to survive. So we put aside our differences, at least temporarily, and pulled together, watched one another's backs, kept one another in check in stressful situations, and sometimes risked our lives for one another. Blacks, Whites and Hispanics alike became like brothers as we struggled to simply survive. I will always remember the acts of compassion and kindness toward each other, toward the few civilians we encountered (especially the children) and even toward wounded and captured North Vietnamese soldiers. In the last few years, I've had the privilege of reconnecting with quite a few of those men (much older men now). It turns out that several of us were starting to search for one another at about the same time. As a result of our shared

experiences, we have a bond of friendship that would be very difficult to match and renewing those friendships has been a truly remarkable experience in itself. Just one week from today many of us will gather at Fort Knox, Kentucky, the current home of the 1st of the 46th Infantry. Today, we're a cross section of society. From my platoon alone there are at least two attorneys. Now, I'm not saying that's necessarily a good thing, but as O'Brien wrote, we had a saying in Vietnam. "There it is. There it is." In other words, it is the way it is, you can't do anything about it, so just accept it and move on. We're also engineers, teachers, factory workers, construction workers, small business owners, and farmers. A few have been disabled since the war, some are now retired, at least a couple, that we know of, have died, and some we haven't been able to locate. Those are the ones I worry about the most. At any rate, we're really all around you, in all walks of life, even though many of you aren't aware of it because we're not likely to call attention to our Vietnam experience. I've worked with other Vietnam veterans for years in some cases before knowing that they too had served. While at Fort Knox next week we'll hold two separate memorial services. On the 27th we will remember all 46th infantry soldiers who lost their lives, both in Europe in World War II and in Vietnam. On the 28th, we'll hold a separate memorial service in honor of the 30 men from Charley Company and supporting units who died the night of 28 March, 1971, when their base, LZ Mary Ann, was infiltrated and over run by a North Vietnamese unit. It's important to those of us who attend this annual event to never forget those we lost, and their families, and to continue to honor their sacrifices.

I recently ran across a short essay written by Tim O'Brien in 1985. It's titled We've Adjusted too Well. I'd like to finish by reading a few passages from that essay because I think it's as applicable today as when it was written.

"Contrary to popular stereotypes, most Vietnam veterans have made the adjustment to peace. Granted, many of us continue to struggle, but the vast majority are not hooked on drugs, not unemployed, are not suicidal, are not beating up wives and children, are not robbing banks, and are not knee-deep in grief or self-pity or despair."

"Like our fathers, we came home from war to pursue careers and loves and cars and houses and dollars and vacations and all the pleasures of peace. By and large we've succeeded. And that's the problem. We've adjusted too well."

"In our pursuit of peaceful, ordinary lives, too many of us have lost touch with the horror of war. Too many have forgotten, misplaced, repressed or chosen to ignore the anguish that once dominated our lives."

"That's sad. We should remember. Not in a crippling, debilitating way, but rather as a form of affirmation. Yes, war is hell. The cliché is true. Oh, we all know it's true, but we know it in an abstract way, the way we know that the moon is a lonely place. But soldiers, having been there, have witnessed the particulars which give validity and meaning to the abstract. That's an important kind of knowledge, for it reminds us of the stakes: human lives, human limbs. Real lives, real limbs. Nothing abstract."

"The same principle, I think, applies for the population as a whole, veterans and nonveterans. We have forgotten, or lost the energy to recall, the terrible, complex and ambiguous issues of the Vietnam War. What to fight for? When, if ever, to use armed force as an instrument of foreign policy? Which regimes to support, and how, and under

what conditions? To what extent and by what means do we, as a nation, try to make good on our beliefs and principles—opposing tyranny, preserving freedoms, resisting aggression?”

“The national memory, like the memory of soldiers, is fickle and too short. Look around. Too many of us call for blood in every foreign crisis, but without any systematic examination of the implications of such action, without much inquiry into the history of American involvement in that part of the world, dumbly, blindly, impatiently.”

“We’ve all adjusted. The whole country. And I fear that we are back where we started. I wish we were more troubled.”