The Weight They Carried

What General William Tecumseh Sherman said is true, “war is hell.” In “The Things They Carried,” by Tim O’Brien, we see the hell that men in war endure. “The Things They Carried” is a captivating, up close story about soldiers in the Vietnam War. The story relates to the title by telling us the things the men carried. We see what material items they hauled from duty to duty, but we also see the emotional baggage that lies heavy in their hearts; this emotional weight is much heavier than their material items. It is important to recognize this aspect because what they carry in their hearts creates both hope and fear; they carry hope for their survival, but they carry fear of possible death.

Hope and fear are visible in the story when O’Brien explains what the men in this story carry through the war. From “pocket knives…matches, sewing kits…and two or three canteens of water” (4) to the three standard weapons—the M-60, M-16, and M-79” (8), we see that they carry much weight on their backs. O’Brien describes to us how much weight these men tolerate on their backs to illustrate to us how horrible the situation is.

On their feet they carried jungle boots-2.1 pounds (4), each man carried a steel-centered, nylon-covered flak jacket, which weighed 6.7 pounds (5). They took turns humping a 28-pound mine detector, and Ted Lavender carried the starlight scope, which weighed 6.3 pounds with its aluminum carrying case. (10)
The men need these materials as they go through the war; they live on the move, never staying long in one spot, so they have to carry all their necessities with them. What they carry also symbolizes what they would have in their homes back in the United States. For example, the men carry a sewing kit even though each of them knows that he will probably never use it. They keep carrying such items because they remind them of home and they create hope as they look forward to going home.

As we are introduced to things that the men carry we notice weight differences between the objects. War items, such as jungle boots, jackets, and the mine detector, put a lot of weight on the soldiers. Other items they carry that remind them of home, such as the sewing kit, are not as heavy. The military items, being so heavy, put strain on the soldiers, like the fear that weighs them down, and the lighter items are like the hope that keeps them going. The heavy items continue to get heavier as time goes on, as their fears become heavier, and the weight of the light items, that create so much hope, become less heavy while they get lost or get thrown away. Eventually these men will only carry their military items, items that create so much fear, and they will lose their light items, their hope, as more days go by.

Hope and fear are seen in the arrangement of the paragraphs as well. As we travel through the story, the author jumps from story to description, from hope to fear. O’Brien is very abrupt in telling us the items they carry and how much they weigh, but then he tells us the story of Lieutenant Cross is in a very emotional manner. The way that O’Brien does this shows the two personalities of Lieutenant cross; the story shows us his personal and human side and his description of items shows us his professional side—the side that has been taught to be a leader, to be a soldier. The order in which these two separate subjects are talked about is very interesting as well. O’Brien jumps from describing what the men carry to telling the story of
Lieutenant Cross many times; one minute he is telling us what items are being carried and the next he is telling us Lieutenant Cross’s story. He moves back and forth between the two extremes numerous times, until the story gets more in-depth, and ultimately ends. The personal side of Lieutenant Cross is being hidden throughout the story behind the soldier part of him; Cross decides that it is time to be a leader after he finally lets his emotions out and tells us his story.

The men also carry love, one of the emotions revealed in the story, through the war; love creates hope as the men anticipate being with their loved ones back home, but it creates fear as death looms around them. “Almost everyone humped photographs” (5) of their loved ones they longed for back home and they carried good luck charms because of their love that they had for their own loves; “Lieutenant Cross carried his good luck pebble. Dave Jensen carried a rabbit’s foot.” (13) O’Brien spends the most time, however, telling us about the love that Jimmy Cross has back home in New Jersey. We read about his date with Martha, how he kissed her but how she didn’t return his feelings, and how he loved her but she will never love him. Cross spends a lot of time looking at her pictures and reading her letters—and we see how this love keeps him sane through the war; we see the hope that keeps him going.

Lieutenant Cross gazed through the tunnel. But he was not there. He was buried with Martha under the white sand at the Jersey shore. They were pressed together, and the pebble in his mouth was her tongue. He was smiling. Vaguely, he was aware of how quiet the day was, the sullen paddies, yet could not bring himself to worry about matters of security. He was beyond that. He was just a kid at war, in love. He was twenty-four years old. He couldn’t help it. (12-13)
This hope that keeps Lieutenant Cross going is one that crates fear as well. Cross is given this false hope of a love that does not exist, and he fears that he will not have Martha to come home to. With other men, a fear may exist because they might never see their love, their flame of hope, again because of possibility of death.

While these men carry this burden of war, O’Brien brings in another idea they carry: hope. As they carry this fear of dying, they hope that everything will turn out alright; they hope that they will survive the hell that they are in. Their love for their lives and the support that each man receives from his partner allow them to hope in spite of their evident fears. 

Death is something that weighs these men down; death surrounds them as they kill and as they fear to be killed themselves. The men move from town to town, kicking corpses, cutting off thumbs (20), shooting anything alive, and burning buildings to the ground. We do not see the emotional aspects of these men’s tasks, but what they have to do is very inhumane, and contributes to the extra weight on their shoulders. O’Brien gives us a glimpse of a soldier’s emotional side as he writes: “After a young boy was killed, one soldier showed somewhat of a sympathetic gesture towards him. He put his hand on the dead boy’s wrist. He was quiet for a time, as if counting a pulse, then patted the stomach, almost affectionately, and used Kiowa’s hunting hatchet to remove the thumb” (14). As the soldier is considerate of the young boy who was killed, he still acts cruelly as he cuts off the boy’s thumb. He does this to hold his emotions in check, to make sure that his emotions do not overtake him while in the horrible situation that he is in.

Death is the central fear in the “The Things They Carried;” this story shows that these men in war cannot hide from their probable death. It is important to remember that all men are afraid to die, including these men. They “cringed and sobbed and begged for the noise to stop
and went wild and made stupid promises to themselves and to god and to their mothers and fathers, hoping not to die. In different ways, it happened to all of them” (18-19). The men carry the idea of death as they travel through the war; it is all around them. The men are concerned that they might die, and while they are dealing with this they must kill other people.

The men’s fear of death is very obvious as their partner Ted Lavender is killed in a humiliating manner while going to the bathroom; we see their moods shift from carefree to great shock. “Oh shit, Pat Kiley said, the guy’s dead. The guy’s dead, he kept saying, which seemed profound—the guy’s dead. I mean really” (13). These men know that death is looming around them, but now it is right beside them. Death now becomes real. Now, more than ever, they carry the baggage of dying, although no one dares to show it. And while their moods seem carefree, the men are not lighthearted. They do this to keep themselves in check, to not break down while under their immense burdens; they do this to not disappoint themselves, but ultimately, they act like this to seem manly, to impress their fellow soldiers. In the end, although, manliness does not matter, the men will realize later that they have abolished all hope and are living alone with fear. They will regret they ignored optimism, because they are now in hell with only gloom.

Along with their material items and their fears and hopes, the men carry reminder of the war, results of what they have been through and of what they have done; and as they carry these results, their burden of fear piles up more each day.

They shared the weight of memory. They took up what others could no longer bear. Often, they carried each other, the wounded or weak. They carried infections…they carried diseases, among them were malaria and dysentery. They carried lice and ringworm and leeches and paddy algae and various roots and molds. They carried the land itself. (14-15)
The men’s heavy hearts drag on as more and more reminders pile up—more death, more sadness. This burden has led these men to be more scripted, more like actors acting out this play of death, war, “love and longing” (20). “They were actors. 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 encyst and destroy the reality of death itself” (19-20). These scripted actions are related to their fear of death. The men have learned that acting out a script makes the situations less real, more make believe, and less frightening.

After Ted’s death, Cross decides that the weight of his love for Martha is too heavy for him to carry. He realizes that his job is to lead his troops, and he can’t love her and do this at the same time.

On the morning after Ted Lavender died, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross crouched at the bottom of his foxhole and burned the photographs…No more fantasies, he told himself. Henceforth, when he thought about Martha, it would be only to think that she belonged elsewhere (22-23). He was now determined to perform his duties firmly and without negligence; he would not tolerate laxity. He would show strength, distancing himself. (24)

Cross decides to give up on this hope, because he overwhelmingly fears for his troop. He feels as though Ted Lavender’s death was his fault, and that he should have somehow prevented it. He now feels fear of his troop decreasing down to nothing, and that he should now take his job as Lieutenant more seriously. Fear wins over hope when Cross decides to stop loving Martha and to come more of a leader to his men. As he throws out her letters and her pebble, he is giving up the hope that has led him through the war so far. And now that he carries only fear and no hope,
Jimmy’s emotional side will eventually collapse because nothing good is holding him up and everything bad is weighing him down.

What these men carry through this war makes them more fearful, and ultimately weaker. What they carry grows heavier as they long for their homes and as they face the fact that they could die at any given moment. And as they go to fight again and again, this weight becomes heavier. “They carried the emotional baggage of men who might die. Grief, terror, love, and longing—these were intangibles; but the intangibles had their own mass and specific gravity, they had tangible weight” (20).