'The Things They Carried,' 20 Years On

March 24, 2010 1:00 PM

Listen to the Interview Here: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=125128156>

-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------

NEAL CONAN, host:

This is TALK OF THE NATION. Im Neal Conan in Washington.

Twenty years ago, writer Tim O'Brien released a book of stories about young men and war, his war, Vietnam. Among many other things, he listed the weight of each soldier's clothes, canteens and can openers.

From the book: Every third or fourth man carried a claymore antipersonnel mine, 3.5 pounds with its firing device. They all carried fragmentation grenades, 14 ounces each. They all carried at least one M-18 colored smoke grenade, 24 ounces. Some carried CS or tear gas grenades. Some carried white phosphorous grenades. They carried all they could bear and then some, including a silent awe for the terrible power of the things they carried.

And that's also the title of that book of stories. "The Things They Carried" is now a staple of college and high school English classes, celebrated as one of the most important books about the experience of war.

The author joins us in just a moment. Today, we want to hear from veterans. What did you carry? What do you still carry? Tell us your story. Our phone number is 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation on our Web site. Thats at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Later in the hour, the great play-by-play man Jon Miller, on the art of play by play. But first, novelist and National Book Award winner Tim O'Brien joins us here in Studio 3A. Nice to have you back on the program.

Mr. TIM O'BRIEN (Author, "The Things They Carried"): Great to be here, thanks.

CONAN: And parts of that book were framed from a distance of 20 years. It's now another 20 years since you wrote the book. What do you still carry?

Mr. O'BRIEN: Well, I carry the memories or the ghosts of a place called Vietnam, the people of Vietnam, my fellow soldiers. More importantly, I guess, I carry the weight of responsibility and a sense of abiding guilt. I carry joyful memories, too, friends I made and the conversations at foxholes where, for a moment or two, the war would seem to vanish into camaraderie and friendship.

The wars don't end when you sign peace treaties or when the years go by. They will echo on until I'm gone and all the widows and orphans are gone.

CONAN: In some ways, you write how the experience of being close to death so often made things extremely vivid. Do those remain the most vivid memories of your life?

Mr. O'BRIEN: Very much so. I just finished talking with a group of high school students here in D.C., and the conversation eventually got to just that question. And there's something about being amid the chaos and the horror of a war that makes you appreciate all you don't have and all you may lose forever, which goes from the sublime, your parents, down to the petty, the Big Mac and a cold Coke. When you're really, really thirsty and you're drinking paddy water, the mind will lock on a can of cold Coke the way your mind might, you know, back in high school lock on a pretty girl.

CONAN: Does it surprise you that all these years later, your book is taught in high schools around the country?

Mr. O'BRIEN: Yes. I had written the book for adults. I had imagined an audience of literate people on subways and going to work and in their homes reading the book. But I certainly hadnt imagined 14-year-old kids and 18-year-olds and those even in their early-20s reading the book and bringing such fervor to it, which comes from their own lives, really.

The book was taken is applied to a bad childhood or a broken home, and these are the things theyre carrying. And in a way, it's extremely flattering, and other times, it can be depressing.

I had a kid come up to me not long ago, though a book-signing line and say, yours is the only book I've ever finished. And of course, it was meant in a flattering way, and I took it that way, but in the back of my mind, I thought, God, all the pleasure that this kid has denied himself.

CONAN: Yeah, but he's got all those great books in front of him.

Mr. O'BRIEN: That's the thing. It opens a door. Some of these kids is the wrong word. It sounds, you know, sort of derogatory. These human beings who are young, a door's been closed to them through their own doing or that of their parents or their schools. Who knows why? And if a book can open that gateway or that doorway and encourage someone to find the pleasures of reading, then what a great thing to have accomplished in your life.

CONAN: Here's one of those literate people, writing with an email, Shannon(ph) in Lyndhurst, Ohio. I'm a professor and I've been teaching your novel for six years now and consistently fall in love with it every time I read it. What I would like to know is: What is the single most important message you would like your readers to take away from the novel? P.S. my students love to hate Azar. I say that because you are Azar.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. O'BRIEN: Well said. Oh goodness, to take one thing away, it's a little bit like having a piece of cloth, you know, unravel a strand and the cloth dissolves as you look at the strand.

The goal, I suppose, any fiction writer has, no matter what your subject, is to hit the human heart and the tear ducts and the nape of the neck and to make a person feel something about the characters are going through and to experience the moral paradoxes and struggles of being human.

And in a way, for me, although on the surface, of course, it is a book about war, it's I've never thought of it, really, that way in my heart. Even when I was writing it, it seemed to be a book about storytelling and the burdens we all accumulate through our lives, our moms and dads and backyards, teachers, which I mean, my dad died, I don't know, four years ago, and he is as gone as anybody I knew in Vietnam.

But like the ghosts of Vietnam, all I need do is, you know, close my eyes a moment and there he is throwing me a baseball. And there's something about carrying the image of him, the symbol, the emblem of carrying that, at least in my experience, is pretty important to being human, I mean.

CONAN: We're talking about "The Things They Carried," and we're asking veterans to call us today to tell us about the things they carried and the things they continue to carry, 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. And we'll begin with Jeff(ph), Jeff calling us from Des Moines.

JEFF (Caller): Yeah, hi, thanks for taking my call.

CONAN: Sure.

JEFF: I was just telling your screener, I'm an Iraq War veteran. I was there in 2005, 2006, and there's never really thought about it, but there's three things I carry with me every day. I still wear my dog tags every day. I'm retired now. And I've got a P-38 can opener from...

CONAN: Those things work better than most everything.

Mr. O'BRIEN: They do.

JEFF: And when I was in Iraq, my driver made wristbands out of 550 cord for everybody in the section, and I wear that every day.

CONAN: What's 550 cord?

JEFF: 550 cord is a nylon cord that if you've ever been in the infantry, it's got a million-and-one uses, probably some I haven't learned yet, but pretty much every infantry that I was ever in...

CONAN: The ones you don't know about are probably the ones in the manual.

JEFF: Yeah, probably, probably. But I wear a suit and tie every day, and a lot of people comment that that's a little jarring to see a piece of green nylon braided into a wristband on my wrist, but I wear it every day, so - just to remember that time, so...

CONAN: And what do you take away, Jeff?

JEFF: You know, I think it's because I was in the military for so long, I hope nobody takes offense at this, but that's a completely different world than the civilian world. And it reminds me of all of my experiences in the past and a lot of good memories. So, I don't know. It's habit now, but...

CONAN: Well, Jeff, thanks very much for the call, appreciate it.

JEFF: You bet, thank you. Bye.

CONAN: Bye-bye. You don't still have your P-38, do you, Tim?

Mr. O'BRIEN: I wish I did. You're right, that thing worked, and most of the can openers I use these days, you know, break in three minutes.

CONAN: Yeah, they do. Terry's(ph) on the line, Terry with us from Gainesville.

TERRY (Caller): Hi.

CONAN: Go ahead, Terry.

TERRY: I've still got my P-38.

CONAN: Oh well, maybe you can make those for the civilian market.

TERRY: Actually, you can get them still through Ranger Joe's at Fort Benning.

CONAN: All right.

TERRY: But I also carry shrapnel in my leg, a bitterness.

CONAN: Where'd you collect the shrapnel, Terry?

TERRY: My last I spent my first nine months as a rifleman and a squad leader west of Chu Lai in 198th Light Infantry. And the last three months, I managed to get a job as the door gunner on an observation ship and I got hit carrying a marine artillery observer out of Da Nang.

You know, I'd like to say that one of the things that I still carry is the wonder that people voted to keep us there. I came back and joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and I found that you couldn't tell anybody what you had witnessed. Without having some experience, it just, they either didn't want to hear it or they couldn't relate to it.

But the people that sent us there and kept us there, I count Johnson and Nixon and Kissinger and the rest of them, they knew that we weren't there to do anything but have a geopolitical influence on the Russians. Unfortunately, I didn't do a research project on why we were in Vietnam until after I got back, and the reasons were not what they told us.

CONAN: It's interesting...

TERRY: I got nobody to blame but myself, but I felt very foolish for having trusted the government with my life.

CONAN: Terry, it's interesting what you say about stories. A lot of Tim O'Brien's book is about war stories and how, if you if they sound believable, they're almost certainly not.

Mr. O'BRIEN: Yeah, thats - I mean, I identify with virtually everything that our caller just talked about. I, too, was in the 198th Light Infantry Brigade near Chu Lai.

TERRY: All right. Way to go 198th.

Mr. O'BRIEN: Yes. Our AO was area of operations was near where the My Lai Massacre occurred, Quang Ngai Province. And my memories are much like yours, and I think I carry with me the same thing you're carrying.

CONAN: Terry, thanks very much for the call, appreciate it. It's 20 years since "The Things They Carried" hit the store shelves. We'll talk more with author Tim O'Brien in just a moment. We also want to hear from veterans today. What did you carry? What do you still carry? 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. I'm Neal Conan. Stay with us. It's the TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

(Soundbite of music)

CONAN: This is TALK OF THE NATION. Im Neal Conan in Washington.

More than two million copies of "The Things They Carried" have sold since 1990. It's been read and passed around by countless veterans from Vietnam to the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Tim O'Brien's book has also been optioned for a film, but so far it's not made it to the big screen.

Now to mark the 20th anniversary, a new hardcover edition is out. To read a selection about the acidic boredom of war, you can go to our Web site at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

Tim O'Brien is with us here in Studio 3A. We want to hear from veterans today. What did you carry? What do you still carry? 800-989-8255. Email us, talk@npr.org. You can also join the conversation on our Web site. Thats at npr.org. Click on TALK OF THE NATION.

And let's go next to Rich, and Rich is with us from Sunman in Indiana.

RICH (Caller): Yes, sir. I actually carry two things personally. I do have a P-38, and I also have what Air Force crew chiefs called a church key, which was your normal, everyday, metal can opener.

I was a crew chief on 141s and KC-135s during the very end of the Vietnam War, stationed with the 619th Mass at Hickam Air Force Base, and during the first Gulf War I was stationed with the 512th aircraft generational squadron out at Dover Air Force Base.

But the things that I don't personally carry, but I used to carry every day, were the coffins coming back from Vietnam, the nuclear warheads coming back out of I guess I can say it today, Subic Bay, because we used to catch them at Barbers Point Naval Air Station outside of Hickam Air Force Base. And the nights that I spent at Dover during the first Gulf War with 145,000 to 150,000 pounds of JP4 on a C-5 and 30 to 40,000 pounds of small arms and rocket ammunitions or motors, and you would see the lightning and then all of a sudden...

CONAN: Oh boy. JP4 is jet fuel, by the way.

RICH: You can't refuel anymore, you know?

CONAN: Oh boy. It's hard to believe, isn't it, Rich? I was just talking with Tim O'Brien, just before we started on the show, that it was 20 years after his tour that he wrote this book. It's 20 years since then, but it's almost 20 years since the first Gulf War.

RICH: The first Gulf War. It's almost hard to believe. I mean, I went in as a kid. I entered the Air Force in 1973, my senior year of high school, and then I went back, joined the Reserves and was in the Reserves for about 18 months, got called up, I believe it was in September of 1989 to go active duty during the first Gulf War.

And I was still a staff sergeant because I had been out for that long, and I was the old man, and it was hard to believe that the things that we put on the shoulders of the young people in the military, because I had been out long enough to say I'd worked now for Proctor & Gamble for a while, you know, and things were important, but they weren't like it was when, you know, you go out there and you're sitting on that bird, and there's lightning and stuff around you.

You, you back then you didn't think about it, but then that was when I was 17, 18, 19, 20. Now you get up to 35, and you say, man, you know, I could be gone in a split second. I mean, we did lose a bird at Dover, got hit with lightning, and it tore the wing off between Number 2 and Number 3 engine, you know?

CONAN: Wow. That is the reminder that is consistent in your book, not just the what you then considered an old man looking back you're a much older man now but the incredible youth of, well, you and the others in Alpha Company.

Mr. O'BRIEN: Yeah, at the time it seemed I was among people who were fairly mature. I mean, looking back on it, these were 19, 20, 21-year-olds. People who at the time looked ancient to me turned out to be 27 or 28.

It's I think it's an important reminder for all of us that those who do our killing and our dying, they're not kids exactly, but they're not they're certainly not mature adults who have been schooled by life and what life can deliver to us. And that is a lesson probably worth tucking away.

CONAN: Email from Charles in Portland, Oregon: I wasn't old enough to serve during the Vietnam War. My step-brother was. I made a knife sheath for him out of leather that held his fixed-blade knife, and it had another compartment for a pair of needle-nose pliers that he found useful for a variety of purposes. I could imagine how that could be useful.

Let's see if we can go next to this is Daniel, Daniel with us from Greenville in Tennessee.

DANIEL (Caller): Yes, sir. I was in First Battalion, Second Marines in Somalia. At the time I was a 19-year-old kid and I picked up there and I've carried since an empathy for other people's suffering. And now I currently work in the mental health field, and I want to thank Mr. O'Brien because when I was in college his book was one of the books that we studied.

CONAN: That was after your tour in Somalia, I understand.

DANIEL: Yes, sir, and it was kind of cathartic for me, actually.

Mr. O'BRIEN: I'm delighted to hear that. I was talking with Neal before the show started and saying that books can sometimes have impacts on human lives that go way beyond what an author intends as the book is being written. And you can help people in ways you would never expect. I'm delighted to hear it. Maybe it helped you a little.

DANIEL: Thank you very much, sir.

CONAN: And Daniel, the things you still carry - I wonder, every day you hear about another ship being taken by pirates off the coast of Somalia or about the gun battles erupting between the government that holds three square blocks of downtown Mogadishu and the warlords. What do you think?

DANIEL: Actually, you know, at the time I was too young to truly understand, but I think we as a nation and as a military service did a major disservice to the Somali people. We left them in a vacuum that, you know, we were there to kind of take that vacuum away, but we left it almost in a worse condition than it was.

CONAN: Daniel, thanks very much, appreciate it.

DANIEL: Yes, sir.

CONAN: Bye-bye. Let's go next this is Chris(ph), Chris calling us from Fort Myers, Florida.

CHRIS (Caller): Yes, hi. Hi, Mr. O'Brien. It's an extreme pleasure to speak with you today. I actually was first introduced to the "The Things They Carried" in Dewitt Henry's(ph) class at Emerson, and I always have three copies of your book: one that I keep completely clean, one that I use for notes as an English teacher, and one that I kind of use for notes as a writer and a learner.

And I think you're crucial to me having been a now-published author myself, if only for the reason that I wear my Red Sox hat with all my book covers because Mr. O'Brien does it, so I can do it too.

(Soundbite of laughter)

CONAN: We like you anyway, Chris.

CHRIS: Of all the amazing things you've given me, probably the most crucial to my development as a person is you gave an arena for my father and I to talk, and I think I'm 35, and I think a lot of my generation, Vietnam is a lost topic for us because our fathers don't want to talk about what happened to them. The memories are too close and too horrific.

And through "The Things They Carried," my dad and I were actually able to have conversations about his time in Vietnam, which ultimately led to me and he's very sick right now, actually, but it led to us being able to have conversations about each other. And so it really became this place where him and I could go to, when we couldn't talk about anything. We'd talk about your work and use that as a vehicle to discuss war and what he had experienced but also who he was as a person.

Mr. O'BRIEN: That's a great thing to hear. You know, the rewards of being a writer can include, you know, awards and money and that sort of thing, but a story like yours is the one that makes me remember being 24 years old and setting out on a career to be a writer.

I hear from disparate sources stories sort of like yours. I had a letter from a young woman, a 26-year-old woman in Minneapolis, a story kind of like yours. My dad was quiet and there was trouble in the family, and my mom was trying to explain to me why she had never been able to fall in love with my father, who had been in Vietnam, at least not wholly in love.

And in AP English class she encountered the book, gave it to her dad. He began talking. The mother began talking. They went to counseling, and they're still together. They're not perfect, but they're happy. And a thing like that makes me want to cry because that is nudging up against my intent in writing that book, not to heal that family in particular but to have a book transcend bombs and bullets and in some way or another worm its way into the human spirit or heart. So thanks.

CHRIS: Well, thank you very much.

CONAN: Chris, thanks very much for the phone call, appreciate it.

CHRIS: Thank you.

CONAN: Bye-bye. Let's see if we can go next to this is Brian, Brian calling us from Birmingham, Alabama.

BRIAN (Caller): Hey, how are you guys doing this afternoon?

CONAN: Not too bad.

BRIAN: Hey. I just want to thank you for your book, because, yeah, I went through a couple combat situations, and I didn't know I was one of the, like these kids that are coming back now and the kids that came back from Vietnam. I was one of those kids, and I didn't know how to talk it out. I didn't know how to get help (unintelligible) I was in my world all by myself, in this pretty much world of hell, you know, my brain.

And I read your book. I read "Chicken Soup for the Veteran's Soul," little things like that. Yeah, I went in with an open mind, but, yeah, I kind of figure, okay, this is just another pile of garbage to just throw onto the stack, you know, and the self-help books. But it actually - it opened my eyes to make me realize that there are other guys out there like me. And it made me wonder, well, you know, (unintelligible) counseling, you know? I signed up for VA medical benefits, stuff like that. And it really helped me.

And I just really want to say thank you, because, I mean, it's funny because my wife, you know, she's a couple of years younger than me, but, you know, I'm from the Northeast, she's from Alabama, but she never had anything to do with the military.

Mr. O'BRIEN: Mm-hmm.

BRIAN: And she has a father that was early 80s, you know, no combat or anything, so she really didn't know how to ask me questions. And it's been, you know - because of your book and other books like that, you know, and the counseling, it's actually made me be able to explain to her the stuff that I went through and, you know, be able just to talk about it instead of just keeping it in and let it become like a little bomb.

CONAN: Yeah. Brian, those of us on the radio side here, thank you for your judicious use of the word garbage.

(Soundbite of laughter)

BRIAN: Oh, yes, no problem. I have some family that worked for the NPR in Boston area so I understand.

(Soundbite of laughter)

CONAN: Trained.

BRIAN: (Unintelligible)

CONAN: Thanks very much, Brian.

BRIAN: And I also have a P-38 also.

CONAN: Really?

BRIAN: And I actually use it today as a screwdriver.

(Soundbite of laughter)

BRIAN: But I just wanted to say (unintelligible) one. Thanks again, guys.

CONAN: Bye-bye. Here's an email that we have, and this from Matt in Palmyra, Virginia. Tim, I've read your books in reverse order. Just finished your memoir, "If I Die in a Combat Zone." The thing I carry in - is a father-in-law who was a captain and reminds me of the hard-edged, anti-hippie, hard-drinking captain who took you out that night to set mines. He doesn't talk about the experience at all. How do I approach the subject or should I leave his memories to himself?

Mr. O'BRIEN: Probably a little of both. I think in the end that there are all kinds of reasons for silence. It can go anywhere from trauma to simple politeness.

War is a party pooper of a topic. You don't go to a cocktail party and say, hey, you want to hear about Nam or Iraq. Out of politeness one stays silent sometimes, at least in my own case, because I have no idea where to start, where to end, what to choose to talk about. It's overwhelming, and therefore you go quiet out of a kind of nervous - the daunting task ahead of where do you begin and where do you end.

So to encourage through books or movies is a starting place. And if a person wants to talk, that person will talk. I certainly don't think that enforced conversation is going to help anyone. But to open the door to conversation through art, not a terrible idea.

CONAN: We're talking with Tim O'Brien. His book, "The Things They Carried," came out 20 years ago. I think it was 20 years ago yesterday.

Mr. O'BRIEN: Yes, it was.

CONAN: You're listening to TALK OF THE NATION from NPR News.

It's interesting you're talking about art. Do you watch movies about war? Do you watch?

Mr. O'BRIEN: When they're good or if I'm told they're good I will. I saw a great film called "The Messenger." Have you seen this movie yet?

CONAN: Yeah.

Mr. O'BRIEN: Man, I thought it was - not in a war, but knocking on doors. And I really was touched by it. And I thought it was beautifully acted and had me in tears. Others bore me.

(Soundbite of laughter)

CONAN: Did you see "The Hurt Locker?"

Mr. O'BRIEN: I haven't seen it yet. No. Is it good?

CONAN: Yeah. It's good. It's interesting. I wonder also, the TV series, "The Pacific." Have you been watching that?

Mr. O'BRIEN: No. I've been on the road. So I think - didn't it just come out?

CONAN: Yeah, it just started a couple of weeks ago.

Mr. O'BRIEN: No, I haven't seen it.

CONAN: It's interesting. You should give it - it's challenging in a sense - I've studied that particular battle there in Guadalcanal at the moment. And I've been there, and it helps to have been there and seen these sights.

Mr. O'BRIEN: I'll bet.

CONAN: But on the other hand, it so accurately transmits the absolute sense of confusion and chaos. I'm amazed they took such risks with the lack of, you know, coherent narrative.

Mr. O'BRIEN: That's good. I'm glad to hear they're doing it that way. I mean that's my recollection of war, is chaos and which - where am I and why am I here and where are they? Utter lost feeling, almost like being trapped in a bad dream.

CONAN: Let's see if we can get another caller in on this conversation. Let's go to Ed. Ed's with us from Traverse City in Michigan.

ED (Caller): Good afternoon, gentlemen. Sorry, I did not read your book. I will - it'll be the first thing on my agenda.

CONAN: Eight million and one.

ED: Well, I had served many years ago in many different fashions. But the thing I would like to most share about the war today is how sterilized it is on television and how people can see it and go, wow, that looks bad and then turn away and then turn on another channel, and not really look in the eye of the other soldier who is fighting and dying just for what they believe in as well. And I have - unfortunately have had that...

CONAN: And where was that, Ed?

ED: In Panama, in '89, for Just Cause. And I was also activated in support of Somalia, which was another interesting (unintelligible) it's an interesting deal to watch a 10-year-old kid holding an AK-47 that was darn near as tall as he is. It was just unreal. But going back to the Panama thing, you know, taking someone's life, looking in their eye up close and personal, knowing that it's just someone else, they might have kids, they might be somebody's brother, somebody's son, father. That's what war is all about. And I think Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg are geniuses and I think that they have captured what it's really about. I mean, I know nothing about World War II, but I - I don't know, I give it to World War II veterans that I was even able to serve.

CONAN: Ed, I hope you tell that kid we hear in the background, you tell that kid your stories.

ED: That's my youngest. And he's keeping me running. But I try not to tell it because I still haven't - because when I got out of Panama, PSTD(ph) was nonexistent. My way of dealing with that was selling off every gun I owned in my house because I got tired of waking up in the middle of the night and shooting howler monkeys and snakes and spiders and PDF, Panamanian Defense Force guys...

CONAN: Mm-hmm.

ED: I got holes in my walls. So that's how I dealt with that.

CONAN: Ed, thank you very much for the call. Appreciate it. And Tim O'Brien, thank you so much for sharing your time today.

Mr. O'BRIEN: Great pleasure. Thanks for having me.

CONAN: Twenty years after "The Things They Carried."

*Copyright © 2010 NPR. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to NPR. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use. Any other use requires NPR's prior permission. Visit our permissions page for further information.*

*NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.*