

Baggage

By Todd Uzelac

In *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien each soldier was responsible for carrying various items. The specific things they carried were “partly a function of rank, partly of field specialty” (O'Brien 5)—things they needed in order to do the specific jobs they had as soldiers. While I was a soldier in Somalia I personally carried several items. A Kevlar helmet, Kevlar flak jacket, M16 rifle, ammunition vest with eight full loaded ammunition magazines, two canteens of water, and a medic bag weighing approximately twenty pounds. After a period of time items like this begin to weigh on a soldier, causing him to want to remove his helmet or rucksack, in an attempt to lessen the burden. Unfortunately for a soldier, it is the mental and personal baggage that they carry that becomes a part of them for life.

Along with those *required* items mentioned above I also carried with me a letter from home. This letter was not one special letter that I carried at all times. It was simply one of the most recent letters that I had received. I carried this with me for several reasons. First of all, this letter provided me with an escape. I could read the words on the page and take a mental vacation from my current situation. I remember reading a letter in which my grandfather was complaining about my grandmother yelling at the television during a Chicago Bulls playoff game. In that moment I was no longer trapped in some faraway country, but back on the couch at my grandparents' home watching the game and laughing. Secondly, I could close my eyes and smell the letter. I would instantly have the image of the person for whom it smelled. I can still smell the perfume in my mind today. Often I will walk into a store or pass by someone, and smell that familiar perfume, and instantly be taken back to that moment in time.

The most important reason for carrying a letter was to remind me that I was not forgotten. Someone actually took the time to write me a letter; for that moment in their life I was on their mind. As these people were on my mind all of the time it was comforting to know that I still had people that cared and would not forget me. For me it was a sign, a sign that even though I was far away and searching for answers I was not alone. It is similar to the way in which, in *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott tells of her god watching over her: “watching me with patience and love.” She continues on to tell how she was not seeing him with her eyes but with her heart (Lamott 49, 50).

In *The Things They Carried*, O’Brien describes how Kiowa carried his moccasins for several reasons. They were thought to be quieter than his boots, allowing him to become silent on scout missions (O’Brien 9). Similarly, those moccasins created a sense of safety and the feeling of comfort. They allowed him to feel close to home when Kiowa was so far away. Upon the death of Kiowa these moccasins were carried by Tim O’Brien. No longer did these moccasins represent safety or thoughts of home. The moccasins were now being carried in remembrance of a fallen brother in combat. O’Brien carried these moccasins for over twenty years until his return to Vietnam, when O’Brien was finally mentally prepared to lay his guilt for the death of Kiowa to rest by placing the moccasins in the place where Kiowa’s life was lost (O’Brien 186). The things they carried were not always easy to set down.

Grandpa, if you are reading this letter then something has obviously gone wrong. I just wanted to take a moment to let everyone know exactly how I feel and what I would have liked to say had I been given the chance.

This was from a letter that I carried with me everyday while I was in Somalia. Today I refer to it as my goodbye letter. It shows the reality and state of mind that I was in during my time in Somalia. The simple fact was that at any given time something could happen that would not allow me the opportunity to say goodbye to my loved ones. This letter was to serve that purpose. Fortunately, this letter was never needed and simply sits as a memory in a safe place at home. As I reflect on this letter today I struggle with what it truly represented. Was it a morbid time in my life where I no longer had hope that I would return home? Did I write this letter with the hope that it would gain some sort of sympathy from my loved ones back at home? Maybe it was done out of fear, that unsettling feeling in your stomach that C. S. Lewis refers to in *A Grief Observed* (Lewis 1). Is it the fear of the unknown—what the next day will bring? Will I make it back from the next mission uninjured? At what moment does my luck run out? All I knew was that life is extremely fragile and the fear of mine coming to an end caused my stomach to be in knots. For whatever the reason, I carried this letter with me at all times. It provided me with a piece of mind knowing that I would not leave my loved ones without some final words to put them at peace.

It is those things that you carry with you once you return from combat that weigh you down even further. To go into greater detail, it is the mental baggage that truly is difficult to deal with. Your mind plays tricks you; begin to ask yourself if you really did experience all of those horror stories. Did I actually see those soldiers lying in the road covered in blood or have I incorporated images from a movie? Certain memories are strikingly clear. For example, I can remember the first girl I ever kissed as if it were yesterday. In my mind I can still see the starving children barely clothed and their stomachs bloated from starvation. I can also see the innocence in their eyes as they would beg for water and food. However, when it comes to the faces of the

dead bodies everything is foggy and unclear. I can remember the missions, but I cannot remember the majority of the names or faces.

Most importantly, I mentally struggle with acceptance. After my unit was sent back to Fort Drum, I did not return home to see my family for several months. The thought of having to explain and relive some of my experiences became too painful. Although I carried several items to remind me of home while I was away it was a long time before I returned. I struggled with how I would be accepted. I was no longer the same man as when I left, and feared I would not be loved. No longer was I the easy-going fun person that I was when I left. Now I was only using laughter to hide behind or to change the subject. One of the biggest fears that I have carried is if the way I continue to feel is normal. It has been over fifteen years since I served in Somalia, and still I struggle with the mental baggage I carry. This became an issue as I prepared to speak to the class on my experience in Somalia. I wondered what type of effect my actions would have on the people within the class. Would I be perceived as weird, such as Tim O'Brien was viewed by his daughter (O'Brien 187)?

In conclusion, soldiers carry more with them than just the expected military packing list such as weapons and ammunition. First of all, I carried a letter from home to keep a piece of home with me, and that way I knew I was not forgotten. Similarly I carried a letter to my grandparents to say goodbye in case something bad happened. The most important thing I carry is the mental baggage of how I would be accepted by others for my actions. For some soldiers these things they carry become too heavy to carry over time. However, some of the baggage becomes such a part of their lives that it is carried forever.

Works Cited

O'Brien, Tim. *The Things They Carried*. New York: Broadway Books, 1990

Lamott, Anne. *Traveling Mercies*. New York: Random House, 2000

Lewis, C. S. *A Grief Observed*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1961