Vietnam recollections relive the war's surreal horror

THE THINGS THEY CARRIED
Written by Tim O'Brien.
Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence.
273 pages. $19.95.

By MARK WEBSTER

The Vietnam war has produced a new generation of writers concerned with the American experience in Vietnam. Primarily, they are former foot soldiers who were down in the real mud, and men, and are now trying to write about what they saw and felt. The best of these authors include Larry Heinemann, Philip Caputo, and Tim O'Brien.

Tim O'Brien's new book, The Things They Carried, is a highly personal collection of stories. The stories concern Tim O'Brien, a soldier 21-years-old patrolling Quang Ngai Province in Vietnam in 1968, and Tim O'Brien, a writer 45-years-old remembering the past. This is a work of fiction and, unlike a recent work (Philip Roth's Deception), O'Brien does not make himself the main character in his book but simply for effect brief inserts, as he states, "I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is true sometimes than happening-truth." The surreal horror of the war in Vietnam can live again only in stories.

The stories in Vietnam are, at the same time, sharply immediate and filtered through memory. The first story, which lends its name to the book, starts us a list of the equipment that the average American foot soldier carried into battle. The list becomes longer in the end and encompasses the hopes, dreams, and fears that each man carried. The impression is one of weight, dragging them into the mud.

Another story, "How to Tell a True War Story," is an indictment of the idea of war as an honorable pursuit: "A true war story is never moral. It does not instruct, nor encourage virtue, nor suggest models of proper human behavior, nor retrain men from doing the things men have always done. If a story seems moral, do not believe it. If at the end of a war story you feel uplifted, or if you feel that some small bit of reluctance has been salvaged from the larger waste, then you have been made victim of a very old and terrible lie."

The soldiers that O'Brien marches with are fleshed out in these stories. He describes the camaraderie that develops between men who face death together and the callousness that appears when death comes to them. They are former foot soldiers who face death together and are fleshed out in these stories. He describes the effort they put into the impersonation of a soccerball and the habit.

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