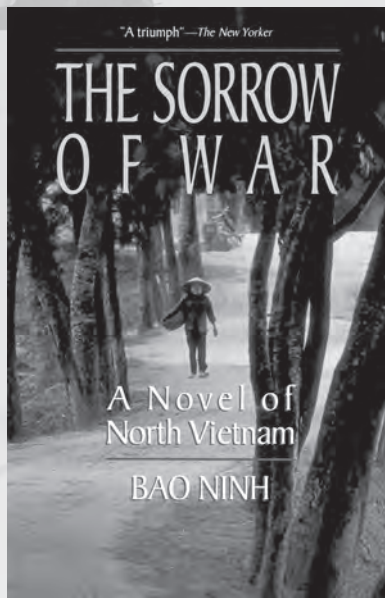


**Editor's Note:** The page numbers of all the quotes from the two books discussed in this article, Bao Ninh's *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1993) and Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2009), are designated in parentheses in the main body of the text, with "N" for Ninh and "O" for O'Brien.

# THE SORROW OF THE THINGS THEY CARRIED

## The American War in Việt Nam and Stories Told by Combat Soldiers from Both Sides

By Yasuko Sato



**B**ao Ninh's (b. 1952) *The Sorrow of War: A Novel of North Vietnam* (1990) and Tim O'Brien's (b. 1946) *The Things They Carried* (1990) are Việt Nam classics that depict traumatic memories of war veterans. These two novels bring the reader into communion with the enormous weight of sorrow that resulted from fighting in a devastating war. *The Things They Carried*, a semi-autobiographical novel that reads like a collection of short stories, is one of the finest and most widely read books about the Việt Nam War. *The Sorrow of War* is an award-winning international bestseller that children peddle on street corners in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City.<sup>1</sup> Ninh is a shaggy-haired writer from Hanoi who served in the Glorious 27th Youth Brigade and fought in the Central Highlands. O'Brien served in Việt Nam as an infantryman from 1968 to 1970. Authored by former foot soldiers, these self-representational narratives present striking similarities in stressful combat situations, wartime traumas, and arduous postwar struggles.

These two works are sorrowful lamentations about how people are callous about Việt Nam War stories. "The general population didn't care about [the victorious North Vietnamese soldiers]," Ninh says of the "disrespect" shown to them (N79). Ninh and O'Brien are intent on inspiring empathy in others by opening themselves up "in a deeply personal way" (N50), even with their "absolute and uncompromising allegiance to obscenity and evil" (O66). The two authors have thus generated strikingly honest and unflinching narratives through firsthand experiences. Their works of fiction are truthful and compelling, embodying qualities that deserve to be called groundbreaking storytelling.

Believing in the power of stories, both writers are most dedicated to transmitting stark realities—what it feels like to fight in Việt Nam and to live afterward. Their stories are crafted in such a way as to maximize the feel of reality. Worthy of note is O'Brien's famous assertion that story-truth is truer than real-truth. Ninh, too, takes this position, pushing the boundaries of psychological authenticity in the art of fiction. Impactful storytelling, which "makes the stomach believe" (O74), takes precedence over factual reporting. Both novelists are committed to sharing their sadness—infinite and boundless sadness that influences (rather than simply informs) the reader.

In O'Brien's novel, the heavy military equipment and supplies US ground forces carry are loaded with a high degree of pathos. He goes to great lengths to detail "the things they carried," including packets of Kool-Aid, C-rations, can openers, candy, mosquito repellants, cigarettes, lighters, steel helmets, jungle boots, ponchos, and dog tags. Foremost among them is the terrible weight of war memory. This brings O'Brien's novel close to Ninh's, whose main character, Kien, chooses to live after the war solely for the sake of not wasting the heartbreaking sacrifices made by others. Kien feels like "an antlike soldier, carrying the burden of every underling," because "the psychological scars of the war will remain forever" (N193).

O'Brien's phrase "the weight of memory" (O14) in *The Things They Carried* is used to open and define the thematic crux of the last episode in *The Vietnam War* (2017), a landmark PBS documentary film series directed by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. From the same page, O'Brien reads more than twenty lines, as if to give concrete expression to the unfathomable and ungraspable sorrow surrounding the war.<sup>2</sup> Indicating the things combatants on both sides carried, the recited passage includes "each other, the wounded or weak" (O14), diseases (like malaria and dysentery), living things (such as lice, leeches, and paddy algae), the sky, the humidity, and Việt Nam itself.

## Why Literature Matters

There are advantages to comprehending war through literature, particularly through the words of those who served. Both novels are engaging and powerfully written for a general audience. They are relatively short (coincidentally, the same length—233 pages), but they are still highly informative. We are able to quickly grasp and understand concrete historical phenomena without needing too much background knowledge. Historical fiction makes past occurrences accessible and relatable.

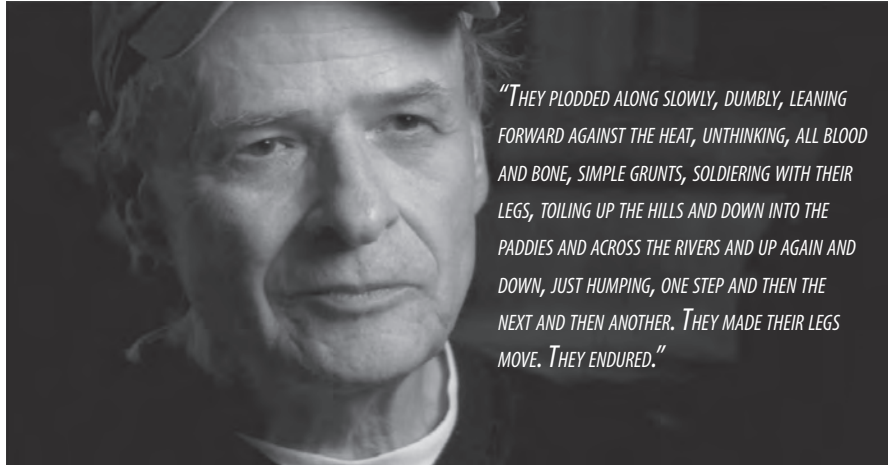
Significant historical details are recounted through the eyes of common soldiers with refreshingly humane feelings. Ninh is irresistibly drawn to “legends and myths about the lives of . . . ordinary soldiers” (N89). Similarly, O’Brien regards his platoonmates as his heroes. He portrays an American tunnel rat who infiltrates a Viet Cong (Vietnamese Communists) underground hideout. When he fulfills this harrowing mission and safely returns, it is as if he was “rising from the dead” (O12). Ninh deploys a character called Hoa, a young female guide from the North. Kien’s group seeks refuge near Cambodia, “carrying the wounded” (N183), during their dangerous retreat after the Tet Offensive in 1968. Hoa is unfamiliar with the Cambodian borderlands and mistakenly leads his unit to a lake full of crocodiles. In a desperate attempt to atone for her mistakes, she decidedly lets herself get captured by rapacious American soldiers. But Kien’s wounded men, whose lives she heroically saves, show no concern for her, because “such sacrifices were now an everyday occurrence” (N192).

In the Việt Nam War, ground troops were vulnerable adolescents. Both books are likely to elicit strong emotional responses in high school and lower-level undergraduate classes, because the soldiers who fought the war were in their late teens or early twenties. Central to their attention was romance. After all, they were still boys and could not stop thinking about girls. In his daydreams, First Lieutenant Jimmy Cross walks lightheartedly with his beloved girl, Martha, “carrying nothing” (O8). Dangerously distracted, he is unable to prevent Ted Lavender from getting killed. Lieutenant Cross carries “the responsibility for the lives of his men” (O5) and, after Lavender’s death, the acute sense of “shame” deriving from the fact that “he had loved Martha more than his men” (O16). He burns her letters and photographs, but it is mournfully impossible to “burn the blame” (O22).

In the two novels, the tragic nature of the war is symbolically portrayed through the monstrous transformations of delicately pretty girls—Mary Anne Bell in *The Things They Carried* and Phuong in *The Sorrow of War*. These lovely female characters are irrevocably changed by the war and manifest shockingly dark aspects of human nature. Such frightening consequences are horrors beyond imagination. Mary Anne is a cute blonde teen who wears white culottes and a pink sweater. After joining a squad of six Green Berets, she takes pleasure in conducting night operations and turns herself into a Greenie with a “necklace of human tongues” at her throat (O105). Phuong, a pure, sweet girl, is gang-raped during an air raid, becomes an appallingly heartless person, and descends into abominable promiscuity. Her tortured soul is a lamentable manifestation of beastly degradation and unspeakable obscenity. Exposing the thinness of the veneer of civilization, the insanity of the war is diametrically opposed to the tenderness of young love. Mary Anne and Phuong are chillingly unmoved by their doomed romances. The craziness of Mary Anne is a kind of mystic fable arising from shared experiences.<sup>3</sup> The breakup between Kien and Phuong, on the other hand, is full of strong and raw emotions, and is portrayed with stunningly penetrating psychological realism.

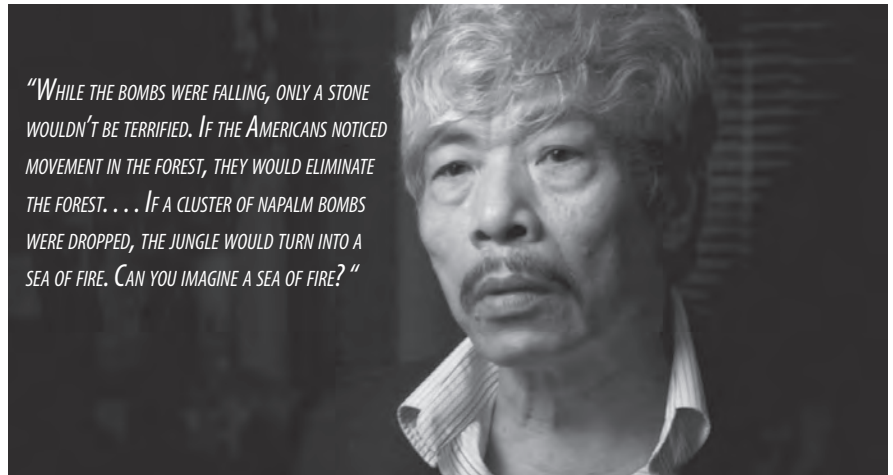
## Việt Nam Savagery

It is a striking irony that radically different American and Vietnamese weapons caused equally soul-crushing dreads. The United States, one of the two Cold War superpowers, resorted to artillery bombardments, napalm bombings, and aerial attacks, while the North Vietnamese waged guerrilla warfare and made extensive use of low-tech but extraordinarily lethal weapons, such as booby traps and landmines. Napalm, an incendiary weapon, turned the Vietnamese jungle into a hellish sea of fire. When American jets carried out deadly airstrikes, the Viet Cong were absolutely terrified. Survivors “suffer the nightmares of white blasts which destroyed their souls and stripped their personalities bare” (N89). Meanwhile, US troops were fearful of Toe Poppers, Bouncing Betties, and booby-trapped artillery rounds. The Toe Popper was a bullet-shaped shell buried in the ground with its tip protruding. Designed to blow a foot off, the shell exploded when an enemy stepped



*“THEY PLODGED ALONG SLOWLY, DUMBLY, LEANING FORWARD AGAINST THE HEAT, UNTHINKING, ALL BLOOD AND BONE, SIMPLE GRUNTS, SOLDIERING WITH THEIR LEGS, TOILING UP THE HILLS AND DOWN INTO THE PADDIES AND ACROSS THE RIVERS AND UP AGAIN AND DOWN, JUST HUMPING, ONE STEP AND THEN THE NEXT AND THEN ANOTHER. THEY MADE THEIR LEGS MOVE. THEY ENDURED.”*

The documentary *The Vietnam War* by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick ends with these words by Tim O’Brien. Source: Screen capture from episode 10. Available on Amazon Prime at <https://tinyurl.com/rct7xcv> and on Netflix at <https://tinyurl.com/yazfrtqu>. © 2017 Vietnam Film Project, LLC.



*“WHILE THE BOMBS WERE FALLING, ONLY A STONE WOULDN’T BE TERRIFIED. IF THE AMERICANS NOTICED MOVEMENT IN THE FOREST, THEY WOULD ELIMINATE THE FOREST. . . . IF A CLUSTER OF NAPALM BOMBS WERE DROPPED, THE JUNGLE WOULD TURN INTO A SEA OF FIRE. CAN YOU IMAGINE A SEA OF FIRE?”*

Bao Ninh was the first NVA (North Vietnamese Army) soldier to release a novel about the war. Source: Screen capture from episode 8 of the documentary *The Vietnam War* by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. Information used for caption taken from episode 10. © 2017 Vietnam Film Project, LLC.

on its camouflaged tip. In contrast to such a relatively low explosive, the Bouncing Betty was a mine capable of inflicting serious wounds on its victim's lower body, jumping off the ground about three feet before its detonation. Three prongs on its cone-shaped top were exposed above the ground and hidden in grassland vegetation.

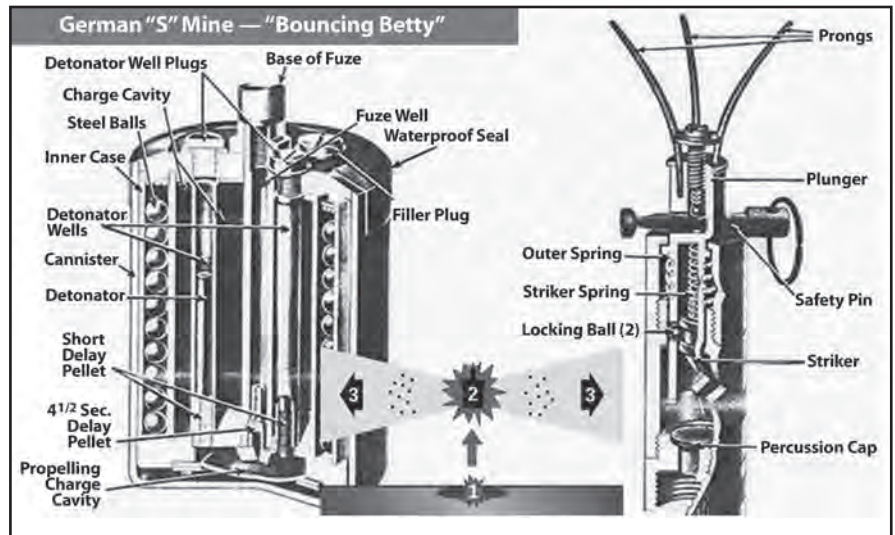
O'Brien emphasizes that just walking—"humping"—was an act of bravery, when the war was "just the endless march, village to village, without purpose, nothing won or lost" (O14). A twenty-eight-pound mine detector is carried "partly for the illusion of safety" (O9). In *The Things They Carried*, Curt Lemon, a handsome soldier laughing and playing catch with Rat Kiley, is turned into trillions of pieces hanging from a tree when a rigged 105 round blows him into it. O'Brien recognizes surreal beauty in "the way the sunlight came around him and lifted him up and sucked him high into a tree" (O67). It takes nearly an hour for O'Brien and other platoon members to peel Lemon off and to throw down the parts. While the gore is being removed, Dave Jensen sings "Lemon Tree," which wakes O'Brien up even twenty years later.

Mental stress was overwhelmingly high during the Việt Nam conflict. Dave Jensen loses his mind because there is "no safe ground," with "enemies everywhere" (O60). When spotting a dead old man who lies face up, with flies and gnats swarming around his face, Jensen shakes his hand and greets him, saying, "How-dee-doo" and "Gimme five" (O214). Kiley hears billions of mutant bugs—those "chemically altered by napalm and defoliants and tear gas and DDT" (O209)—whispering his name all night long. Before he shoots himself, he proclaims that the whole war is "one big banquet" (O212) for those giant killer bugs.

On both sides, drugs, booze, and smoking were rampant to relieve stress and anxiety. Lavender is a character who carries tranquilizers. Kien's scout platoon smokes *rosa canina*, a wild rose species with a powerful scent, to forget the hellish reality of fighting a calamitous war. For the Vietnamese, *rosa canina* was functionally equivalent to marijuana. In Ninh's mind, intoxicating fragrant flowers are inseparable from the urge to fantasize about women. A political commissar mercilessly bans Kien's regiment from having access to *canina*, because its use makes troops lethargic and dysfunctional. Kien calls *canina* a "blood-loving flower" (N12), as it diabolically abounds in burial places.

The line between life and death was extremely thin. Ninh portrays as "gamblers" (N8) North Vietnamese scouts who enthusiastically play cards together. They are eventually left only with "the torn, dirty set of cards" that is "fingerprinted by the dead ones" (N9). American troops, too, developed a passion for card games, because a deck of cards was easy to carry around and gave them an easy, carefree pastime. The relentless war savagely tortured the minds of fighting men. As O'Brien indicates, the gruesome reality of death had to be mitigated by unconventional word usage. For example, a "kicked bucket" is easier to handle than a corpse. For the same reason, a VC nurse burned by napalm is called a "crispy critter." "Just a crunchie munchie," Kiley murmurs as he steps over the body of a baby, a "roasted peanut" (O226). In Ninh's novel, Can, a good-hearted farmer who loves his mother more than anything else, becomes unhesitant in bashing skulls in with his rifle. He flatly remarks, "I've killed so often it won't mean a thing if I kill myself" (N22). When shooting someone in the head, Kien sadistically watches his submachine gun bullet "hit him right in the mouth and his face exploded" (N120). The battlefield whips Kien into a firing frenzy and almost impels him to commit a massacre.

Setting a village on fire was American soldiers' way of venting their fears and frustrations in the face of invisible and elusive Viet Cong guerrillas. In *The Things They Carried*, after Lavender is shot to death on his way back from peeing, O'Brien's platoon takes revenge on the village of Than Khe. They destroy everything, including chickens, dogs, and the village well, and reduce the village to burned wreckage with artillery fire. In reality, O'Brien's company was stationed in Quang Ngai Province, where the infamous My Lai Massacre had broken out a year earlier.<sup>4</sup> The slaughter of some 300 Vietnamese civilians by a US infantry company was a tragedy emblematic of impulsive aggressive behaviors among enlisted men.



During the Việt Nam War, the Communist North Vietnamese forces extensively employed the German "S" mine, dubbed "Bouncing Betty" by American infantry in Europe during World War II, against US military forces. Bouncing Betties, along with booby traps, were used against US forces and inflicted serious psychological damage, because they were primarily designed to mutilate rather than kill. Seeing fellow soldiers horrifically maimed by such hidden weapons was one of the major reasons for some retaliatory American atrocities in Việt Nam, including the My Lai Massacre on March 16, 1968. Source: *Tackleberry Solutions* at <https://tinyurl.com/ql5nhqw>.



The burning of a Vietnamese village suspected to aid the Viet Cong is famously portrayed in Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986). Before a sudden outburst of rage and aggression, three of the platoon members are shockingly killed (two by a cunningly disguised explosive booby trap and one through torture and execution by unseen assailants). Source: Screen capture from *Platoon* (1986), directed by Oliver Stone. © MGM Home Entertainment, LLC.



### Senseless and Purposeless

From O'Brien's standpoint, the Việt Nam War was a futile war that did not have a clear purpose. Like tens of thousands of other American draft dodgers, he originally seeks exile in Canada. He decides to enlist, however, for the sole purpose of avoiding "embarrassment" (O57). He is from a small town in Minnesota and feels like all eyes are on him, even on a cosmic scale. He also finds himself unable to shed his American identity when Canada is "just a boat ride away" (O47). Deep down, he loves America so dearly that he cannot think of any other home.

*In both novels, soldier stories serve as a means of keeping the war dead alive. In the realm of fiction, those grievously affected by the war are allowed "to emerge unchanged from the war."*

The US government deployed combat troops to Việt Nam, afraid that Communist rule would spread to neighboring countries in Southeast Asia like a falling row of dominoes. Việt Nam was a proxy war during the Cold War (1945–1991), with North Việt Nam supported by the Soviet Union, China, and other Communist allies, while South Việt Nam had anti-Communist allies like the United States. America's crusade against Communism, however, has no place in O'Brien's stories, as they focus on his fellow soldiers as precious friends. The domino theory has absolutely no relevance to their life-and-death situations.

Exposing the hollowness of the Việt Nam War, Ninh observes: "The path of war seemed endless, desperate, and leading nowhere" (N15). Since Vietnamese Communists valorized the war, Ninh went against the grain and "was reprimanded by the regime for stressing the 'utterly tragic' aspect of the struggle rather than its glories."<sup>5</sup> He speaks of frontline soldiers, not so much in terms of valor, but in terms of their ordeals.

The war was so destructive that it heavily traumatized both sides. Describing a horrific battle with a unit from the ARVN (Army of the Republic of Việt Nam) Special Commandos, Kien remarks, "Rivers of blood; no winner, no loser, both battered" (N92). The fall of Saigon, the capital of South Việt Nam, on April 30, 1975, marked the end of the war. On Victory Day, the triumphant troops' "greatest prize" at Saigon airport is sleep (N100). They sleep and eat by the corpse of a naked girl, at whom an angry soldier kicks and yells: "You fucking prostitute, lying there showing it for everyone to see" (N102). On V-Day, Kien and

his buddies do not experience uplifting joy. As time goes on, the forlorn reality of postwar peace becomes apparent. "So much blood, so many lives were sacrificed—for what?" (N42), a truckdriver asks plaintively. In a frenzied conversation at an obscure nightspot, Leather Jacket sneeringly exclaims: "Victory, shit! The victory we got was a victory for morons. Call that civilization and progress? Garbage!" (N155).

### The Psychological Cost of Fighting in Việt Nam

For numerous Việt Nam combat veterans, the end of the war is not a return to normalcy. Flashbacks and nightmares occur as a result of triggers. In *The Sorrow of War*, Kien is tormented by the "dreaded whump-whump-whump" (N46) sound of a ceiling fan in his bedroom, as it reminds him of the sound of helicopter rotor blades that brought terror to the Viet Cong in the field of battle. In 1969, one of the fiercest battles of the war took place on Ap Bia Mountain, which would be horribly nicknamed "Hamburger Hill" because of the tremendous carnage. The stink of rotten meat on a busy street induces Kien to recall "walking over strewn corpses" (N46) there.

Việt Nam War veterans are haunted by painful memories decades after the war's end. In his book, O'Brien keeps remembering how he was unable to stop staring at the young Vietnamese man he killed, one of whose eyes was

After eleven days of intense fighting, a platoon occupied Ap Bia Mountain (Hill 937) on May 20th, 1969, but the North Vietnamese recaptured it a month later. The mountain peak was dubbed "Hamburger Hill," because many GIs were ground up like hamburger meat. Despite the horrific human cost, this military attack turned out to be grievously senseless. Source: Screen capture from the last minutes of the film *Hamburger Hill* (1987). Available on Amazon Prime at <https://tinyurl.com/w7pacam>. © RKO Pictures.

“a star-shaped hole” (O120). Killing also leaves Kien with deep psychological scars. Among those he murderously kills in revenge is a girl at the South Vietnamese police headquarters. O’Brien denounces the war “for taking away the person I had once been” (O176). Ninh reckons that ragged veterans are “destined to be forever lonely” because they have “lost not only the capacity to live happily with others but also the capacity to be in love” (N230). Among Kien’s comrades is a combat driver who used to be a remarkable fighter and has become “a ragged, beggarly drunk” because he is assailed by his memories of a tank running over bodies” (N152) due to an unmistakable difference between mud and corpses. When Kien flies into a fiery rage and starts a bloody fight one night, the police arrest him but release him the very next morning because “they’d seen enough of the veterans” (N156).

O’Brien tells a touching story of Norman Bowker’s twelve seven-mile clockwise turns around the lake in his hometown in central Iowa. Bowker drives round and round slowly without a purpose, feeling safe in his father’s Chevy. Before the war, Bowker drove around the lake with his favorite girl and with his friends. He now has trouble with the locked-up memories of his friend Kiowa’s death. When Kiowa was swept away by a catastrophic avalanche of waste in a “shit field” during a torrential rain, Bowker grabbed Kiowa’s boot and pulled hard, only to back off, overwhelmed by the terrible stink. Under the unbearable weight of guilt, Bowker seeks somebody to share this heart-wrenching story. But his town, Des Moines, is “very prosperous, with neat houses and all the sanitary conveniences” (N144). After his twelfth revolution, Norman gets out of the car, submerges himself in the warm waters of the lake without taking off his clothes, stands up, and watches evening fireworks. Three years after O’Brien writes this poignant story, Bowker hangs himself in a locker room.

Việt Nam is rendered as a goddess land. Kiowa is a devout Baptist who always carries his illustrated New Testament around with him, but he dies senselessly, swallowed in a thick, filthy muck. The shit field explodes when a young soldier switches on his flashlight, shows Kiowa a picture of his girlfriend, and hears him say, “Hey, she’s *cute*” (O163). The flashlight, “a stupid mistake” (O161), tragically attracts mortar attacks by the enemy. O’Brien loathes the slime of the shit field as an embodiment of “all the waste that was Việt Nam, all the vulgarity and horror” (N176).

### The Redemptive Power of Storytelling

Surviving his rotting wounds, including the one “between his legs” (N140), Kien asks why Heaven has allowed him to live. Ascribing meaning to the burden of survival, Kien, Ninh’s semi-autobiographical protagonist, believes that he is entrusted with a special mission to finish his war novel. Kien’s dedication to writing is profoundly aligned with his postwar MIA (missing in action) work of gathering remains in the jungles. In the *Jungle of Screaming Souls*, “numerous souls of ghosts and devils,” deceased members of his 27th Battalion, are “refusing to depart for the Other World” (N6).

In both novels, soldier stories serve as a means of keeping the war dead alive. In the realm of fiction, those grievously affected by the war are allowed “to emerge unchanged from the war” (N226). In our imagination, the violent deaths of such endearing characters as Lavender and Kiowa can be replaced with the vibrant lives that they might have lived without the war. From the person of Phuong, Kien’s beautiful lover, nightmares beyond any measure can disappear. Mentally traumatized soldiers can remain wholesome, unaffected, and youthful. Lemon, who is blasted into a tree and torn to pieces, is “still out there in the dark, naked and painted up, trick-or-treating, sliding from hootch to hootch in that crazy white ghost mask” (O227). O’Brien has derived such ennobling insights from oral storytelling among US servicemen.

Ninh recognizes “human bonds” as central to the effort to “overcome the thousand sufferings of the war” (N233). Speaking of saving lives with stories, O’Brien tacitly invites us to carry unforgettable, heart-rending war stories into the future. As he puts it, “Stories are for joining the past to the future” (O36). What future is it, then, that these novels inspire us to envision? The answer is inextricably tied to what we make of the sorrow of the things they carried. ■



A wounded American GI supported by fellow soldiers. Source: Screen capture from episode 9 of the documentary *The Vietnam War* by Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. Available on Amazon Prime at <https://tinyurl.com/yazfrtqu> and on Netflix at <https://tinyurl.com/yazfrtqu>. © 2017 Vietnam Film Project, LLC.

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### NOTES

1. See Christian G. Appy, *Patriots: The Vietnam War Remembered from All Sides* (New York: Viking, 2003), xvi. Ninh originally published *The Sorrow of War* in 1987 in Vietnamese.
2. Under the title of “The Things They Carried—Tim O’Brien,” a video clip is available at <https://tinyurl.com/y6lr2bby>.
3. This explanation is offered in “Tim O’Brien on ‘The Things They Carried’” at <https://tinyurl.com/y46yh5z>.
4. See Appy, 542–544.
5. Stanley Karnow, *Vietnam: A History* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 49–50.