

THOMAS E. BARDEN

Urban Legends in Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*

In assessing Tim O'Brien's writings, reviewers and critics have repeatedly questioned what they are by genre and what they should be called. *The New York Times Book Review* said of *Going After Cacciato*, "maybe we are dealing here with that form of writing the new South American novelists would call 'magic realism'."¹ The *New Statesman's* review of *If I Die in a Combat Zone* said, "A strange aura surrounds it; it is casual and impressionistic. It unfolds like looking through a series of snapshots."² And Robert Harris, also writing for the *New York Times*, said of *The Things They Carried*, "The publisher calls the book a work of fiction, but in no real sense can it be considered a novel."³ Many critics have noted that O'Brien's works have no plots in the conventional sense of the word, no developed characters, and little formal structure. My purposes in this essay are to examine O'Brien's Vietnam War novel *The Things They Carried* and to suggest a connection between the issue of genre and his particular success among the increasing number of writers who have taken the Vietnam War as their subject. The conceptual tool I will use is folklore.

In an essay in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1957 titled "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," Richard Dorson urged literary scholars to establish biographical evidence for authors' uses of folklore by demonstrating their firsthand knowledge of the lore they depicted in their works. He called for the citation of sources outside the literary works to substantiate that the folklore in them is "actually traditional material."⁴ While critical thinking

about folklore's complex relation to literature has evolved substantially since Dorson's day, his point remains reasonable. So, I will begin by testifying that O'Brien's works accurately render the folklore of the U. S. combat ground troops in the Vietnam War during the late 1960s and early 1970s, which I can do as a former member of the group that maintained and transmitted that lore.

The germ of the ideas I will explore here and my realization of the importance of folklore to O'Brien's work occurred when I experienced that shock of recognition so often associated with the contemporary legend—the flash realization that a story one has accepted as fact is actually a traditional migratory narrative. It came for me at the following passage of his 1990 novel, *The Things They Carried*:

“God's truth,” Mitchell Sanders said. “A six-man patrol goes up into the mountains on a basic listening-post operation. The idea's to spend a week up there, just lie low and listen for enemy movement. They've got a radio along, so if they hear anything suspicious—anything—they're supposed to call in artillery or gunships, whatever it takes. Otherwise they keep strict field discipline. Absolute silence. They just listen. We're talking regulation, by the book LP, they don't say boo for a solid week. . . . So what happens is, these guys get themselves deep in the bush, all camouflaged up, and they lie down and wait and that's all they do. And man, I'll tell you—it's spooky. It's jungle, sort of, except it's way up in the clouds and there's always this fog—like rain only it's not raining—everything all wet and swirly and tangled up and you can't see jack, you can't find your own pecker to piss with. Like you don't even have a body . . . so after a couple of days the guys start hearing this real soft, kind of wacked-out music. Weird echoes and stuff. Like a radio or something, but it's not a radio, it's this strange gook music coming right out of the rocks. They try to ignore it, right, but it's a listening post, so they listen. And every night they keep hearing this crazyass gook concert, like the mountains are tuned in to Radio fucking Hanoi. Naturally they get nervous.”³

The story ends with the sounds getting stranger and stranger—cocktail party talk, chamber music, Buddhist chanting, etc.—until the patrol “loses it.” They break radio silence and call in artillery, gunships, air strikes, everything at their disposal. I will continue to quote, both to close the narrative and to showcase the folk speech and jargon O'Brien renders so effectively:

“And I’ll tell you, they fuckin’ crash that cocktail party. All night long, they just smoke those mountains. They make jungle juice. They blow away trees and glee clubs and whatever else there is to blow away. Scorch time. They walk napalm up and down the ridges. They bring in Cobras and F-4s, they use Willie Peter [white phosphorus] and HE [high explosive] and incendiaries. It’s all fire. They make those mountains dance. So around dawn things finally get quiet, like you never even heard quiet before. One of those real thick, real misty days—just clouds and fog, and the mountains are absolutely dead-flat silent, like every sound is sucked up inside the fog—except they still hear it! So they pack up and start humping, down the mountain, back to base camp, and when they get there they don’t say diddly. Not a word. It’s like they’re deaf and dumb. Later on this fat bird colonel comes up and asks what the hell happened out there. Why all the ordnance? . . . They just look at him for a while, sort of funny like, sort of amazed, and the whole war is right there in that stare. It says everything you can’t ever say. It says, man, you don’t even want to hear this. Then they salute the fucker and walk away.” (83)

I first heard this story in July, 1970, at a fire support base named St. Barbara in Tay Ninh Province, Republic of South Vietnam. This base, about ninety kilometers west of Saigon, was positioned with heavy artillery [the 2nd of the 32nd Regiment] to fire targets along the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Cambodia. It was in the Third Corps Tactical Zone (CTZ), hundreds of kilometers south of O’Brien’s area in the North Central Highlands around My Lai. I was told the story because radio-silent listening posts were common in my unit’s area of operations, ‘The Parrot’s Beak.’ It was one of a set of narratives I heard as a “newbie” on the base and in country. My variant, unlike O’Brien’s, included interpretations of the “gook music phenomenon.” My narrator, Staff Sergeant Jay Somerfield, thought it was Viet Cong psychological warfare. Another participant in the session thought it was “all in the heads” of the soldiers who experienced the sounds as a result of sensory deprivation.

After recognizing this Vietnam folk legend from personal experience, I read “with a folklorist’s eye” four of O’Brien’s Vietnam War books, *If I Die in a Combat Zone*, *Going After Cacciato*, *The Things They Carried*, and *In the Lake of the Woods* to locate and annotate the folklore in them. I concluded that an awareness of folklore and its place in group dynamics is an overriding feature of his work. Folk speech, folk syntax, slang and jargon, graffiti, folk sayings, proverbs, folk rhymes, superstitions, and particularly war stories, rumors, anecdotes, and legends permeate his books. Furthermore, O’Brien as narrator typically points out, glosses, and comments on the folklore he presents. I found *The Things They Carried* to be

O'Brien's most folkloric work. This is not to say that his other works are not rich in folklore, or that the ideas I discuss here would not apply to them as well. But, for the present essay, I will confine my focus to that work, which is increasingly seen as his best literary effort.

There are thirty-two specific passages depicting folklore in *The Things They Carried*. Some are short items such as the folk rhyme O'Brien's unit developed on patrol as they followed an old papa-san—"Step out of line, hit a mine; follow the dink, you're in the pink" (37). Some are simply glosses by O'Brien, as the book's narrator, pointing out folk speech and naming—"They were called legs or grunts," or "To carry something was to hump it" (5). And some are detailed explanations and commentary on customs and practices, such as the ritual behavior of Private Henry Dobbins in wrapping his girlfriend's pantyhose around his neck before going on patrol—"Like many of us in Vietnam, Dobbins felt the pull of superstition. Whenever we saddled up for a late night ambush Dobbins would make a ritual out of arranging the nylons, carefully tying a knot, draping the two leg sections over his left shoulder. There were some jokes of course, but we came to appreciate the mystery of it all" (130). He closes the passage with this observation about folk beliefs—"Dobbins was invulnerable; never wounded, never a scratch. In August he tripped a Bouncing Betty, which failed to detonate. It turned us into a platoon of believers. You don't dispute facts" (131).

In addition to these short items, there are numerous passages like the "gook music" one quoted previously, which are complete texts of folk narratives plus comments on their situational and performance contexts. These passages are especially interesting since they reveal O'Brien's thorough understanding of contemporary folkloristics (either learned or intuited). In a chapter titled "The Ghost Soldiers," for example, he goes to great pains to detail the set-up, the pacing, the group response, and the atmospherics of what is clearly an oral narrative performance event—"We partied until chow time. Afterwards, we kept on partying. It was one of the rituals. Even if you weren't in the mood, you did it on principle. By midnight it was story time. 'Morty Phillips used up his luck,' Bowker said. I smiled and waited. There was a tempo to how stories got told. Bowker peeled open a finger blister and sucked on it. 'Go on,' Azar said. 'Well, that's about it. He wasted his luck. Pissed it away.' Norman Bowker nodded, started to speak, but then stopped and got up and moved to the cooler and shoved his hands deep in the ice. In that pause I felt close to them all, the sores and blisters, the stories, the in-it-togetherness" (221).

In the chapter “Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong,” O’Brien goes beyond offering his own personal author/narrator insights into a legend’s performance to render the meta-folkloric comments of the troops themselves as the session unfolds:

“Whenever he told a story Rat Kiley had a tendency to stop now and then, interrupting the flow, inserting little clarifications or bits of analysis and personal opinion. It was a bad habit, Mitchell Sanders said, because all that matters is the raw material, the stuff itself, and you can’t clutter it up with your own half-baked commentary. That just breaks the spell. What you have to do, Sanders said, is trust your own story. Get the hell out of the way and let it tell itself. But Rat couldn’t help it. He wanted to bracket the full range of meaning. ‘I know it sounds far out,’ he’d say, ‘but it’s not like impossible or anything. I was right there. I saw it. She was a girl, that’s all. I mean if it was a guy, everybody’d say, hey no big deal, he got caught up in the Nam shit, he got seduced by the Greenies. See what I mean? You got these blinders on about women, how peaceful they are, all that crap; you got to get rid of that sexist attitude.’ Rat would go on like that until Mitchell Sanders couldn’t tolerate it any longer. It offended his inner ear. ‘The story,’ Sanders would say, ‘The whole tone, man, you’re wrecking it.’ ‘Tone?,’ he’d say, ‘Tone? I didn’t know it was that complicated. The girl joined the zoo—one more animal—end of story.’ ‘Yeah, fine,’ but tell it right!” (116-117)

There is no passage in the book that better demonstrates how important the performance of oral narrative is to Tim O’Brien. Although no critics have specified this term in discussing how he conveys such a visceral sense of the reality of Vietnam, almost all have noted how well he accomplishes the effect. I submit that it is O’Brien’s extensive and sophisticated use of the folklore of the troops in the war in its performance setting that accounts for it.

Yet, what does this really say beyond placing O’Brien in the realist, “local color” school of writers since Mark Twain and Bret Hart who also used dialect, folk speech, and verbal lore this way. So his books are full of folklore and that explains their effective realism. Isn’t there more going on between O’Brien and folklore than that? As early as the 1957 *Journal of American Folklore* special issue on folklore and literature, scholars such as Daniel Hoffman and Carvel Collins were asking for more than Dorson’s rudimentary process of folklore identification called for.⁶ And by 1965, folklorist Alan Dundes had outlined a comprehensive approach to

studying folklore within literature.⁷ Three years later, invoking Dundes' article, Hennig Cohen put the matter this way, "Folklore in American literature has been put to work in a number of ways—among them, to advance the plot, to characterize, to provide structure, and to defend, explain, and raise questions about the nature of society."⁸ The critics who have asked what kind of books O'Brien has written, can find their answer in the last portion of Cohen's list, his novels are designed to defend, explain, and raise questions about the social group he participated in during his year in the war. He turned to folklore, particularly oral narratives in their performed settings, to do so. By genre, then, his books are ethnographies of speaking and enacting folklore. Exploring the nature of the face-to-face group known as the platoon is his most basic aim, and depicting the storytelling event and the community it creates is his basic method. As he says addressing the reader near the end of *The Things They Carried*—"I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening truth" (203).

So, if the stories in *The Things They Carried* are renderings of actual folk narrative performances O'Brien witnessed and remembered more or less accurately, they can be subjected to basic analyses as folklore. With the "gook music" story, for example, we might start with the functionalist's prime questions, answering with William Bascom's four functions of folklore: education, validation, compensation, and integration.⁹ There are some obvious points; the story, both in O'Brien's text and as I experienced it, teaches about the job of forward observing at a listening post. In my case, it clarified my situation and status as a new member of the unit and strengthened that unit's solidarity as "in the know." But it is necessary to move beyond Bascom's abstractions to specifics: To what exactly do O'Brien's oral narratives educate his characters? What exactly do the narratives validate for them? For what do they compensate? How do they work to integrate the soldiers into their group? And, finally, what do the stories do in Kenneth Burke's sense that all language art is symbolic action, or "equipment for living?"¹⁰

First, stories such as the "gook music" narrative are accounts of the collapse of consensus reality. The story doesn't try to explain the surreal event it depicts, but only to show that the inexplicable was the norm in Vietnam. Like all folklore, the narrative constitutes cultural information. Its message is that the usual rules of daily reality have ceased to apply, even though the higher executives of the war don't realize it. It places the field grade officer from the rear in opposition to the soldiers and displays their inevitable failure to communicate. It proceeds precisely the way a supernatural legend does, by shaking our assumptions about the world and revealing how little we truly know about reality. In discussing ghost tales

the folktale scholar Max Luthi said: “In the [supernatural] legend one senses the anxiety of man, who, though apparently a part of the community of his fellow men, finds himself ultimately confronted with an uncanny world which he finds hard to comprehend and which threatens him with death.”¹¹

The absence of anything solid and real to cling to is a recurring theme in the stories O’Brien’s characters tell. Their sessions are consistently shown as serving, if not to ease group anxieties, at least to share and claim ownership of them. This interpretation supports the view that legends are texts that reveal the psychological state of the group that maintains them. Like the work of such folklorists as Luthi, Dundes, and Brunvand¹², this interpretation reads narrative performances as a kind of folk therapy in which a group explores, in an imaginative and therefore safe manner, issues that are stressful and frightening.

My linking of O’Brien’s group’s narratives to ghost tales is not as large a stretch as we might imagine. In fact, he invites it. The word “ghost” occurs frequently as slang, one chapter is titled “The Ghost Soldiers,” and in one passage O’Brien directly connects this slang term for the Vietcong with the pervasive feeling of unreality the soldiers shared. Notice the extensive use of the pronoun “we” in the passage:

We called the enemy ghosts. ‘Bad night,’ we’d say, ‘the ghosts are out.’ To get spooked meant not only to get scared but also to get killed. The countryside itself seemed spooky—shadows and tunnels and incense burning in the dark. The land was haunted. We were fighting forces that did not obey the laws of twentieth century science. Late at night on guard it seemed that all of Vietnam was alive and shimmering—odd shapes swaying in the paddies, boogie men in sandals, spirits dancing in old pagodas. It was ghost country and Charlie Cong was the main ghost—the way he came out at night, the way you never really saw him, almost magical. He could blend with the land, changing form, becoming trees and grass. He could levitate. He could fly. He could pass through barbed wire and melt away like ice and creep up on you without sound or footsteps. He was scary. In the daylight, maybe, you didn’t believe in this stuff. You laughed it off. You made jokes. But at night you became a believer. (229)

“If reality becomes surrealistic,” asks a critic of post-modern fiction, “what must fiction do to be realistic?”¹³ O’Brien’s characteristic answer is that fiction can tell ghost stories.

But fear of surrealistic ghost guerrillas is not the only anxiety the men in O'Brien's platoon experienced. To his literary credit O'Brien had the insight to depict their smaller-scale concerns too, and to realize that these were important. He relates their tales on such subjects as embarrassment and fear of "losing face," on "going native" (losing touch with civil behavior), and on the psychic weight of thoughts about their loved ones "back in the world," which he suggests was the heaviest of all the "things they carried." While most of the time the soldiers' speech groupings are deliberate and ritualized "bull sessions," other times they are casual, momentary—and all the more striking because of it. For example: "Norman Bowker lying on his back one night, watching the stars, whispered to us, 'I'll tell you something, if I could have one wish, anything, I'd wish for my dad to write me a letter and say it's okay if I don't win any medals. That's all my old man talks about, nothing else. How he can't wait to see my goddamn medals'" (39).

Here is the heart of this book, a voice speaking in the dark to his buddies about his deepest anxieties. As Jean-Francois Lyotard says in *The Postmodern Condition*, "A self does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations. A person is always located at 'nodal points' of specific communication circuits, however tiny these may be."¹⁴ This is the nature of the social bond from a postmodern perspective, and it is precisely the nature of the social bond in Vietnam. Groups did not come to the war together as the platoons, brigades, and regiments of previous American wars did. They did not project a future in which they would leave together in victory or die together in defeat. They trickled in alone and joined an already formed group. Each "self" realized he would "DEROS" (a verb made from the anagram Date of Estimated Return from Overseas) alone when his 365-day countdown was up, or die when his number was up. It is O'Brien's genius that he has located the only stable core in the isolated and absurd social universe called the Vietnam war—the verbal society formed daily and nightly by the telling of stories.

The "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong" narrative mentioned earlier is the most extended storytelling event in *The Things They Carried*. It provides an example of how O'Brien's "story truth" operates to explore the soldiers' most deep-seated anxieties. Further, it reveals that other dimension that scholars of the legend have noted as important, namely the moral one. As folklorist Polly Stewart has pointed out, "All folklore reflects the moral order of a society or of a group within the society; it simultaneously upholds that order and instructs the society's members in it. Folklore persuades, courts, and controls a group's members. Though on the surface legends may be told without any open claim to instructiveness, most are

informed by a powerful moral message couched in ironic terms: seekers of hidden gold mines, intruding in forbidden places, meet with unknown terror, with inexplicable death, or—at the very least—with frustration. Greedy people get their just desserts. Whether the events in the stories can be rationally accounted for or not, they illustrate the dangers inherent in behavior that is inimical to collective order and to personal well-being.”⁵

“Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong” is just the kind of negative exemplum Stewart is describing. It plays out the consequences of violating the boundary of the most potent structural opposition in the group mind of the soldiers in Vietnam—the boundary between THE NAM, the garden of evil, and THE WORLD, the civilized, pre-war universe of “round-eyed” women, family, school, job, flush toilets, and (a word O’Brien uses often) decency. The “Sweetheart” legend is a base-camp belief tale about a soldier who brought his high school girlfriend to Vietnam. Her name was Mary Ann Bell and she was from Cleveland Heights, Ohio:

“It can’t happen, Sanders said. ‘Nobody ships his honey over to Nam. It don’t ring true. I mean, you just can’t import your own personal poontang.’ Rat shook his head. ‘I saw it, man. I was right there. This guy did it.’ ‘His girlfriend?’ ‘Straight on. It’s a fact. Flies her over. This cute blonde—just a kid, just barely out of high school—she shows up with a suitcase and one of those plastic cosmetic bags. Comes right out to the boonies. I swear to God, man, she’s got on culottes. White culottes and this sexy pink sweater. There she is.’ I remember Mitchell Sanders folding his arms. He looked over at me for a second, not quite grinning, not saying a word, but I could read the amusement in his eyes. Rat saw it too. ‘No lie, he said, ‘Culottes.’” (102)

As O’Brien has Rat Kiley tell it, it wasn’t hard to get her in country. “Cleveland to LA, LA to Bangkok, Bangkok to Saigon. She hopped a C-130 up to Chu Lai and stayed overnight at a USO—a cinch,’ said her boyfriend Mark Fossie. ‘Thing is you got to want it enough” (103).

Once Mary Ann gets to the base she and her boyfriend set up house in a bunker near the Special Forces hooch and take up the relationship of high school sweethearts that they had lived before the war. At first, things go smoothly. The men genuinely like her. “Out on the volleyball court she wore cut-off blue jeans and a black swimsuit top, which the guys appreciated, and in the evening she liked to dance to music from Rat’s portable tape deck. There was a novelty to it; she

was good for morale. At times she gave off a kind of come-get-me energy, coy and flirtatious, but apparently it never bothered Mark Fossie” (103).

But soon she becomes curious about things, wanting to know what a trip flare is, talking to the ARVNs out on the perimeter, picking up little phrases of Vietnamese, and learning how to cook rice over a Sterno can. “The guys liked to kid her about it—our own little native, they’d say—but Mary Ann would just smile and stick out her tongue. ‘I’m here,’ she’d say, ‘I might as well learn something.’” She gets more and more involved in things and starts to get a feel for the way the Vietnamese people live. She appears oblivious to the danger around her, swimming in the Song Tra Bong while her boyfriend tries to explain to her about snipers, ambushes, and the stopping power of an AK-47. The men agree she’s tough—“A real tiger,” said Eddie Diamond. ‘D-cup guts, trainer bra brains.’ ‘She’ll learn,’ somebody said. Eddie Diamond gave a solemn nod. ‘That’s the scary part. I promise you, this girl will most definitely learn.’”

O’Brien runs subtle observations on performance style, texture, and context throughout the story’s thirty pages. In the following passage, for instance, notice how he directs attention to Kiley’s delivery:

“In parts, at least, it was a funny story, and yet to hear Rat Kiley tell it you’d almost think it was intended as straight tragedy. He never smiled. Not even at the crazy stuff. There was always a dark, far-off look in his eyes, a kind of sadness, as if he were troubled by something sliding beneath the story’s surface. Whenever we’d laugh, I remember, he’d sigh and wait it out, but the one thing he could not tolerate was disbelief. He’d get edgy if someone questioned one of the details. ‘She wasn’t dumb,’ he’d snap. ‘I never said that. Young, that’s all I said. Like you and me. A girl, that’s the only difference, and I’ll tell you something: it didn’t amount to jack. I mean, when we first got here—all of us—we were real young and innocent, full of romantic bullshit, but we learned pretty damn quick. And so did Mary Ann.’ Rat would peer down at his hands, silent and thoughtful. ‘You don’t believe it, fine,’ he’d say, ‘just means you don’t know human nature. You don’t know Nam’” (109).

Eventually Mary Ann leaves Fosse and takes up with the “Greenies,” the Special Forces long range patrol, who have their own hooch at the edge of the base camp. She cuts her hair and wraps it in a dark green bandanna; she stops wearing jewelry and cosmetics; she learns to disassemble, clean, and fire an M16; and finally she

starts to go out on night ambush with the Greenies. Rat Kiley explains that it isn't sexual, "She wasn't sleeping with any of them. At least not exactly; I mean, in a way she was sleeping with all of them, except it wasn't sex or anything. They was just lying together, her and these six weirded-out Green Berets" (112). She slips further and further into the mind-set of the bush until Fosse, in desperation, braves the Greenies hooch to retrieve her. Inside, he finds the severed head of a large black leopard, a pile of bones under a sign that reads ASSEMBLE YOUR OWN GOOK! FREE SAMPLE KIT!, and Mary Ann, now wearing a necklace of human tongues. "You are in a place,' Mary Ann said softly, 'where you don't belong.' She moved her hand in a gesture that encompassed not just the hooch but everything around it, the entire war. 'You hide in this little fortress, behind wire and sandbags, and you don't know what it's all about. Sometimes I want to eat this place. Vietnam. I want to swallow the whole country—the dirt, the death—I just want to have it inside me. It's like this appetite. You know When I'm out there at night, I feel close to my own body, I can feel my blood moving, my skin, my fingernails, everything, it's like I'm full of electricity and I'm glowing in the dark—I'm almost on fire, burning away to nothing—but it doesn't matter because I know exactly who I am.'" When Fosse turns to Rat Kiley, who has come with him to the hooch, and says, "Do something, I just can't let her go like that!," Kiley answers "Man, you must be deaf. She's already gone" (121).

The story ends, like all local legends, with a projection of past events into the present and future. One day she walks off by herself into the bush. No body is ever found, no clothing, no equipment. There is an inquiry, Mark Fosse is busted to PFC, and Mary Ann is listed as MIA. But according to the Greenies, she is still out there, in the dark. Rat Kiley finishes the tale:

"Odd movements, odd shapes, late at night, when the Greenies were out on ambush, they said the whole rain forest seemed to stare at them, and a couple of times they almost saw her sliding through the shadows. Not quite, but almost. She had crossed to the other side. She was part of the land. She was wearing her culottes, her pink sweater, and her necklace of human tongues. She was dangerous. She was ready for the kill." (125)

The moral lesson of the taboo violation intermixes in this narrative with the bitter truth that even a "sweetheart" is susceptible to Vietnam's power to corrupt. It is the story equivalent of the fact that the U. S. soldiers who participated in the My Lai massacre were a cross-section of average American young men. This "heart of

darkness” legend is about many things simultaneously. It is about going native, one of the grand ideas of American literature and cultural history—from the Boston Tea Party, *The Deerslayer*, Indian captivity narratives, and Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, to *Apocalypse Now* and *Dances With Wolves*. It is also about the “Dear John” letter tradition and the lore of Jodi, the figure in cadence calls who is back home in your car with your girl while you are at war; it warns against letting those fears make you violate the taboo of bringing the peace world into the war world. And it is a rendering of the deep structure of the group’s world view as the following set of polarities: Nam/World, male/female, experience/innocence, chaos/order, death/life, and finally (the most numinous) evil/good.

But what it means is also a function of how it feels. The story rings true to me as a Vietnam veteran. It feels like the whole war in a grain of sand. And “ringing true” is, in the final analysis, what O’Brien is trying to do. He begins *The Things They Carried* with an epigram from John Ransom’s *Andersonville Diary*, an account of the infamous Confederate Civil War prison. The diarist writes, “Those who have had any such experience as the author will see its truthfulness at once, and to all others it is commended as a statement of actual things by one who experienced them to the fullest.” I think O’Brien chose this epigram for its key word “experienced.” He wants to write books that put us through an experience. It was Jimi Hendrix, widely acknowledged as the poet laureate of the Vietnam War, who asked the question ARE YOU EXPERIENCED?

Reality itself was destabilized in Vietnam. Events in and of themselves had no solidity; a favorite phrase in response to an overwhelming event was “It never happened.” This particular war—like “magic realism,” like folk legends, like psychoactive drugs (which were very common, even in non-garrison situations)—warped and reordered reality and brought consensus actuality into question. O’Brien is clear about this. He says “A thing may happen and be a total lie; another thing may not happen and be truer than the truth” (89). He shows us that nothing had meaning until the soldiers’ group agreed that it did. The only stability was that of the community of discourse the soldiers maintained, and nothing was real except by the group’s consensus. Tim O’Brien knows that if you can experience this “story truth,” the group’s narrations of reality, then you have experienced Vietnam. This is both how and why this Vietnam novel works.

Notes

1. Richard Freedman, "A Separate Peace" *The New York Times Book Review*, Feb. 12, 1978: 21.
2. Chris Waters, *New Statesman*, Jan. 4, 1974: 24.
3. Robert Harris, "Too Embarrassed Not to Kill," *The New York Times Book Review*, Mar. 11, 1990: 8.
4. Richard Dorson, "The Identification of Folklore in American Literature," *Folklore and Literature, A Symposium, Journal of American Folklore*, 70 (1957): 1-8.
5. Tim O'Brien, *The Things They Carried*, New York: Penguin, 1990, 79-81 (subsequent references will be by page number in the essay text).
6. Carvel Collins, "Folklore and Literary Criticism," 9-15 and Daniel Hoffman, "Folklore in Literature: Notes Toward a Theory of Interpretation," 15-21, both in *Folklore and Literature, A Symposium, Journal of American Folklore*, 70 (1957)
7. Alan Dundes, "The Study of Folklore in Literature and Culture: Identification and Interpretation." *Journal of American Folklore*, 78 (1965): 136-142.
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10. Kenneth Burke, *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, New York: Vintage, 1957, 253.
11. Max Luthi, *Once Upon a Time: On the Nature of Fairy Tales*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, 142-43.
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THOMAS E. BARDEN was drafted in June, 1968. After Basic and Advanced Infantry Training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, he attended Officer Candidate School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma. As a Lieutenant, he served with the 2nd Battalion of the 32nd Artillery Regiment, The Proud Americans, in Tay Ninh Province of the Republic of South Vietnam from June 1970 to July 1971. The 2/32nd is a heavy artillery regiment (8 inch and 175 mm) that fired for the 25th Infantry Division, the 1st Cavalry Division, and the 1st ARVN Infantry Division. He received the Bronze Star in February, 1971. After military service, he attended graduate school at the University of Virginia where he received the Ph.D. in English in 1975. He joined the faculty of the University of Toledo in 1977. He was a Senior Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Wales in Swansea, United Kingdom, in 1993. He currently directs the University of Toledo's Honors Program.