

The Things They Carried — Education Resource Guide



OVERVIEW

The artwork and artifacts that make up this permanent exhibit give students and visitors the opportunity to interact with objects carried by “grunts”, or ground soldiers, in Vietnam and brings to life the experiences written in the book *The Things They Carried* by Timothy O’Brien. By interacting physically and virtually, visitors to the exhibit can make a personal connection to the labor associated with the Vietnam “grunt” as well as consider the emotional “weight” carried by these soldiers during their tours of duty.

The works on display in the museum use visual language that can forge a link between student, soldier, art and history as well as create relevant connections to contemporary issues of war, emotional hardship and positive change. The lessons in this packet support learning that focuses on how art can be used as a tool to create dialog about the complexity of war and the human experience with it. Students will explore how to interpret and understand art as a tool of communication by synthesizing and assimilating information from different disciplines into demonstrated comprehension and development of abstract and critical thinking through the learning process.

Our Teacher Resources are designed to aid your class in creating meaningful, in depth experiences during their visit. This material is designed to be used in preparation for, during and to continue dialog after your visit to the museum and aims to maximize the impact of your class' experience.

We encourage feedback on these resources and hope you will share with us any student work generated from your visit as part of our vision of creating stronger bonds with the schools that interact with our museum.

Illinois State Standards for Education

English Language Arts:

5A —Students who meet the standard can locate, organize, and use information from various sources to answer questions, solve problems, and communicate ideas.

5B —Students who meet the standard can analyze and evaluate information acquired from various sources.

5C —Students who meet the standard can apply acquired information, concepts and ideas to communicate in a variety of formats.

Fine Arts:

25B —Students who meet the standard understand the similarities, distinctions, and connections in and among the arts.

27A —Students who meet the standard can analyze how the arts function in history, society and everyday life.

27B —Students who meet the standard understand how the arts shape and reflect history, society and everyday life.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Please take the time to visit our online interactive website for [*The Things They Carried*](#) exhibit and share information with your students about the physical as well as emotional weight carried by soldiers during times of war.

Some topics to consider for discussion might include:

- How has the physical weight of the gear soldiers wore and carried changed over time? How does the weight carried by the Vietnam “grunt” compare to a ground soldier in other wars before and after Vietnam (i.e. The Civil War, The Iraq War, current conflicts)? What has changed/stayed the same and why?
- How might the physical weight of a soldier's gear affect their emotional weight?
- How does the environment where the soldier is fighting affect their experience during times of conflict and while being away from home?

- Research the climate and demographics of Vietnam- how does this information factor into the American soldier's experience during the war?
- Review with students some of the things the soldiers carried. Do they have questions as to why something was carried, or what it did? Have them make a list to research and investigate further during their visit. If possible, submit a list of questions prior to your visit so we can provide you with additional information.

WHAT ALL GRUNTS CARRIED	LBS	TOTAL WEIGHT CARRIED, AVG LBS
Necessities:		
P-38 can openers		
pocket knives		
heat tabs		
wristwatches		
dog tags		
mosquito repellent		
chewing gum		
candy		
cigarettes	15.0	
salt tablets		
packets of Kool-Aid		
lighters		
matches		
sewing kits		
Military Payment Certificates		
C rations		
2-3 canteens of water		
steel helmet	5.0	
jungle boots	2.1	
jacket	6.7	
poncho	2.0	
M-16 gas-operated assault rifle	7.5	
ammo, 20-round magazine	0.7	
entrenching tool	5.0	
12 rifle magazines	8.4	

20 rifle magazines	14.0
14 oz fragmentation grenade	0.87 5
M-18 smoke grenade	1.5
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TOTAL AVG.	68.7

Added Items for some grunts

+ M-79 grenade launcher and full load of ammo	1.9	70.68
+ compass, maps, code books, binoculars, and a loaded .45 caliber pistol	2.9	71.68
+ claymore antipersonnel mine & firing device	3.5	72.28
+ M-79 grenade launcher, unloaded	5.9	74.68
+ starlight scope	6.3	75.08
+ M-60 ammo	10	78.78
+ medic supplies	20	88.78
+ M-60 machine gun, unloaded	23	91.78
+ PRC 25 radio	26	94.78

Alternated Items carried by all

+ mine detector	28	96.78
+ PRC-77 scrambler radio	30	98.78

For most of the soldiers, the weight of their gear, equipment, weapon(s) and ammunition was more than half of their body weight. Other conditions that added to the difficulty of this duty included tropical heat and extremely high humidity, difficult and unfamiliar terrain (jungles, rice paddies (large plots of land soaked in water), hilly and mountainous wilderness), long marches of up to 8 hours a day, rain, monsoon, or especially hot weather, as well as the emotional weight of fear, homesickness and trauma experienced by most soldiers during their tour(s) of duty. This is probably how the foot

soldiers got the nickname “grunts”: from grunting under the weight and fatigue that truly did typify their days.

The contents (and weight) of the rucksacks (backpack), which held most of the weight, was largely determined by the duration and type of mission: a trip that would take a few hours and was less likely to result in contact with the enemy would necessitate far less than an overnight mission or missions that would last more than a day.

ACTIVITY 1- Using the Book *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien

In *The Things They Carried*, the real and imagined is blurred or intentionally altered:

“I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth.”

“‘Daddy, tell the truth,’ Kathleen can say, ‘did you ever kill anybody?’ And I can say, honestly, ‘Of course not.’ Or I can say, honestly, ‘Yes.’”

Personal narration and memory are imperfect as well as subjective and in this case volitional and deliberate. Likewise, the perceptions of an audience can also affect communication. Have the students consider what is meant by “story-truth” and “happening-truth”:

- How do they differ?
- Is the narrator made less or more reliable in making the disclosure that not every story he tells is true? Why might the narrator have brought this ambiguity into the stories?
- How can these same “truths” be applied to artwork? What about the different truths’ applications to direct interaction with an object or a person—is it easier to stretch or challenge the truth in writing versus in an in-person dialogue or conversation, or when discussing an object instead of an event or personal experience?
- Is a photograph or video more reliable or honest than a painting, sculpture, or the written/spoken word?

ACTIVITY 2

What were the items soldiers carried that surprised students most? If they were going to war themselves, are there objects they would want with them that they have not seen listed in the exhibit or in the book? Why do they consider these items so important?

DURING YOUR VISIT:

THE GEAR

The gear can be handled and tried on by the students with adult supervision.

What is represented is some of the gear and an idea of the weight that the average foot soldier would bear each day.

The artifacts on display include*:

- M1 Helmet with a letter in the webbing.
- A flak jacket.
- Web gear. This is a belt with harnessing that goes over the shoulders to carry necessary items including: canteen, knives; grenades; ammunition sacks, dry socks with cans of food inside each (this provided the soldier with extra food, and allowed socks to air-dry); an ax; and pouches for additional items.
- a mine detector

- hand held explosives
- cases of c-rations
- ammunition and ammunition cases
- Examples of camouflage
- entrenching tool
- jungle boots
- water purification tablets
- matches
- a compass
- personal grooming supplies
- a sandal made from an old tire worn by a North Vietnamese KIA soldier
- Vietnamese non-la (conical) hats
- North Vietnamese clothing
- North Vietnamese pith helmet
- rucksack
- hand held radio
- soldiers' letters home
- photographs taken by US and Vietnamese soldiers during the war

*Not all of the items on display are listed here. In addition to the items listed above, over 50 photographs and artworks accompany this permanent exhibit. Our collection of artifacts continues to grow and is often rotated to accommodate new items. Please contact the museum if there is a specific artifact you are interested in showing your group prior to your visit.

ACTIVITY 1

When trying the gear on, walk around, climb the stairs, or even do some squats. This will give the individual a better sense of how cumbersome the gear was and a sense of how heavy it can be with physical activity.

ACTIVITY 2

Have students find a piece of art or an artifact that reminds them of a story or character from *The Things They Carried*, and share with the group.

ACTIVITY 3

Was there an artifact or artwork that made war and the soldiers' struggles more real to them?

AFTER YOUR VISIT

ACTIVITY 1

Using the museum's Online Collection, have students choose a work of art that is compelling to them.

- Make a connection between this work of art and a quote from the book *The Things They Carried*.
- Research: How is the written work the same/different than the art work?
- What factual information is shared in each? What personal information is shared in each?

ACTIVITY 2

Have students consider how social media is used to communicate both personal, historical information. Consider everything from status updates to images posted of friends, articles, memes etc.

The Vietnam War was the nation's first televised war and the way in which the media portrayed the conflicts, the soldiers and the politics of what was happening shaped societies opinion about what was happening in Vietnam.

- How might the Vietnam War have been portrayed differently if there had been social media? What would people share/post/tweet? Use research on recent conflicts or political events for examples.
- Create a mock-up of what posts on social media sites/youtube/etc might look like. Use information learner at NVAM to support your project.

ACTIVITY 3

The artwork in the exhibit *The Things They Carried* is a combination of documentation and personal response to events that happened in the artists' lives. For this activity, students should consider an event that took place in their lives so far that made a significant impact on them (this can be any event that took place on either a personal level or a national/international scale with any emotional impact, positive, negative or otherwise)

- Using drawing, collage, photographs, audio and/or video, create a work of art that captures the impact this event had on your life. Use inspiration from the museum collection to create an artwork that reflects your own personal narrative.
- Create a classroom gallery in the room or online to showcase the work and to facilitate discussion and positive critique of the final artwork.

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