

***The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien**  
**AP Language and Composition**

**Chapter One: "The Things They Carried"**

1. Discuss the things the soldiers carried.  
What was the most interesting? Why?  
What was the most unusual? Why?  
What surprised you? Why?
2. How did they carry "the land itself"?
3. How did they carry themselves?
4. Tally the weight of everything one soldier carried.
5. What things determined the different things each soldier would carry?
  - a.
  - b.
  - c.

**Journal 1:**

***The Things We Carry:***

This journal will reflect on the different things we carry with us on a daily basis...both the tangible and intangible things. There are questions below to get you thinking and writing, but let the questions inspire commentary and questioning about the things we carry and the things that weigh most heavily on us.

Consider what you carry with you on a daily basis. What is in your backpack or school bag? Approximately how much does it all weigh? What are the items that you must carry with you at all times? Does their weight correlate with their importance? What intangible things do you 'carry' with you (for example parental pressures, responsibility, etc.)? What weighs more heavily on you: the tangible or intangible things?

**Chapter Two: "Love"**

1. Comment on your reaction to this chapter.

**Chapter Three: "Spin"**

1. Explain IN YOUR OWN WORDS how "the war was like a Ping-Pong ball."
2. How is the writing of this book so far (the author's narrative style) LIKE the war?
3. What was the average of the soldier's in O'Brien's platoon?
4. Discuss the concept of "stories."

**Journal 2:**

**"Love" and "Spin"**

Re-read the last paragraph of "Spin" that begins, "Forty three years old and the war occurred..." In this paragraph, O'Brien reflects on the function of "the story" and memories. He says, "And sometimes remembering will lead to a story, which makes it forever. That's what stories are for. Stories are for joining the past to the future."

Your assignment is to recall a memory or an event that you would like to make forever (you will make it forever by writing it into history). Is there an event in your life or an experience that was so vivid, powerful or memorable that you would like to write it down so you never forget it? It could be a childhood memory or a recent one...but your goal is to write a vignette (short story) to give it life. Be as specific as possible and recall with detail and specificity.

## **Chapter Four: "On the Rainy River"**

1. Why do you think O'Brien "never told [this story] before"?
2. Discuss the following passage:  
"All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit."
3. Using discussions and information from History class, answer the following questions:
  - a. "Was it a civil war?"
  - b. Was it a "war of national liberation or simple aggression?"
  - c. "Who started it, and when, and why?"
  - d. "What really happened ... in the Gulf of Tonkin?"
  - e. "Was Ho Chi Minh a Communist stooge, or a national savior, or both, or neither?"
  - f. "What about the Geneva Accords?"
  - g. "What about SEATO and the Cold War?"
  - h. "What about dominoes?"
4. How do the answers to the questions above change or solidify your opinion of the book?
5. What effect did the discussion of O'Brien's job in the "Armour meat-packing plant" have on you and your reading of the book?
6. How and why did O'Brien "crack"?
7. O'Brien writes, "Even now, as I write this, I can still feel that tightness. And I want you to feel it." How does he do this with his writing? Is he successful? (Cite at least one passage where O'Brien made you "feel.")

## **Journal 3:**

### **"On the Rainy River"**

#### **Complete Parts 1 and 2 of this task:**

##### **Part 1: Reflecting on O'Brien...**

O'Brien calls himself a coward for going to war. *Why* does he consider himself a coward? Do *you* think he was cowardice or brave in deciding to go to war? Explain. What do you think you would have done?

##### **Part 2: Connecting it to now...**

The war in Iraq has often been referred to as the "new Vietnam," so much so, it had been suggested that a draft might have been implemented. In addition, the refusal of the government to release military personal (after their service time is up) from duty has been called a "reverse draft." What are your feelings on these issues? Do you think we could ever find ourselves in another Vietnam? If put in O'Brien's shoes (if a draft were implemented in the US now), what would you do and why?

## **Chapter Five: "Enemies" and Chapter 6: "Friends"**

1. Discuss your reaction(s) to these chapters.

## **Chapter Seven: "How to Tell a True War Story"**

- 2-6. Discuss five (5) explanations of how to tell a true war story.

## **Journal 4:**

### **“How to Tell a True War Story”**

Directions: Answer the following questions.

1. Return to the short story, “How to Tell a True War Story.” Find and list as many elements of a true war story as possible. Look for the following phrases for prompts:
  - “A true war story.....”
  - “You can tell a true war story by... ”
  - “True war stories do/do not...”
2. Now re-read and think about the list of elements of a true war story. How do these elements affect and influence your responses, as a reader, to the stories in this chapter and in this book?
3. According to O’Brien, why are stories important?
4. What is more disturbing to you, the death of Curt Lemon or the killing of the baby water buffalo? Explain your reasons.
5. On the last page of the story, O’Brien says this story was “not a war story. It was a love story.” What does he mean by this? In what sense was “How to Tell a True War Story” a love story?

### **Chapter Eight: "The Dentist"**

1. Discuss your reaction(s) to this chapter.

## **Journal 5:**

### **“Metaphors for War”**

In the style of O’Brien, create at least 5 metaphors (or similes) for war. These metaphors can be about actual combat, about being on the home front, watching it on the news, hearing the stories, seeing the pictures, etc. Like O’Brien, your metaphors must also explain themselves. Be creative, not simplistic or predictable. Use creativity, figurative language and imagery.

### **Chapter Nine: "Sweetheart of the Song Tra Bong"**

1. O'Brien writes, "But in a sense she never returned. Not entirely, not all of her." Discuss how this was, in many ways, true of ALL who went to Vietnam.

## **Journal 6:**

### **“The Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong”**

*Psychology – the study of mind and behavior*-----**REFER BACK TO THE MAN WHO MISTOOK HIS WIFE FOR A HAT by Oliver Sacks**

### **DID MARY ANNE GO MAD????????????????????????????????????**

Mary Anne Bell underwent drastic changes in behavior and personality while visiting her boyfriend in Vietnam. Perhaps Mary Anne “went crazy” ...or... perhaps the behaviors and characteristics Mary exhibited in Vietnam were there all along, waiting to be ignited. What do you think?

Write a **psychological analysis** of Mary Anne Bell. Consider and explain what the reader knows of Mary Anne before she came to Vietnam, her gradual changes in personality and behavior, and her concluding actions and state of mind. Make connections between what is possibly going on in her mind and how it is revealing itself through action. Ultimately, answer the question: **Has Mary Anne gone insane or has she found her true self?**

*Become a psychologist! Get into the mind of Mary Anne; analyze and try to explain her behavior. Be conclusive...although we are not certified psychologists, we can come to conclusions and have fun with this. Your analysis should be at least one page in length.*

### **Chapter Ten: "Stockings"**

1. Do you agree that "In many ways [Dobbins] was like America itself"?

### **Chapter Eleven: "Church"**

1. Discuss your reaction(s) to this chapter.

### **Chapter Twelve: "The Man I Killed"**

1. Discuss your reaction(s) to this chapter.

### **Journal 7:**

“Stockings”                      “Church”                      “The Man I Killed”

For this journal, you will choose 1 of the above stories as the inspiration for your writing. Before completing this journal, you should re-read the story in its entirety:

- If you choose “Stockings,” your entry should be about some aspect of superstitions (superstitions in general, why people have them, your superstitions, or some other related topic).
- If you choose “Church,” you should choose 1 quote from the story as the springboard for your entry. There are lots of good quotes and questions about religion, God, why bad things happen to good people, etc. Please state the quote first.
- If you choose “The Man I Killed,” your journal should be about a life-changing moment or event. How did this moment or event change you, your outlooks, beliefs, how you see yourself and/or the world around you? Try and be as specific as possible when describing this person or incident, like O’Brien is describing the man he killed.

### **Chapter Thirteen: "Ambush"**

1. Discuss your reaction(s) to the following passage:

"It was entirely automatic. I did not hate the young man; I did not see him as the enemy; I did not ponder issues of morality or politics or military duty .... I was terrified."

### **Chapter Fourteen: "Style"**

1. Discuss your reaction(s) to this chapter.

### **Chapter Fifteen: "Speaking of Courage"**

1. Do you agree that "routine, daily stuff -- just humping, just enduring" was worth something? Why or why not?

### **Chapter Sixteen: "Notes"**

1. What was your reaction to the first paragraph of this chapter?

2. Discuss your reaction(s) to the following passage:

"By telling stories, you objectify your own experience. You separate it from yourself. You pin down certain truths. You make up others."

3. If the passage in question 5 explains what a writer does, how would you explain what a reader does?

### **Journal 8:**

“Speaking of Courage” and “Notes”

Metafiction – writing that refers to the process of writing. Often it explores the relationship between fiction and reality, memory and consciousness. Metafiction is self-reflexive and introspective in nature.

*Task: Write a **metafictive** journal entry. Explore your own writing processes. How do you approach different types of writing (creative, poetry, essay, journal, etc.)? What do you like or dislike about writing and WHY? Can you remember your first writing experiences...how your writing has developed?*

## **Chapter Seventeen: "In the Field"**

1. O'Brien writes, "The filth seemed to erase identities, transforming the men into identical copies of a single soldier, which was exactly how Jimmy Cross had been trained to treat them, as interchangeable units of command."

Do you agree or disagree that a leader must see his/her followers as "interchangeable" or all alike?

## **Journal 9:**

Creative Writing - Happening Truth v. Story Truth

For this journal you will tell 2 versions of the same story: the "happening truth" and the "story truth." The first thing you should do is come up with the bare bones of the story (the basic facts). Your story can be a war story but need not be. It can be about most anything. Then you should write your 2 versions based on the bare bones.

Your "happening truth" should be about one paragraph and will **have little to none of the following:**

- elaboration
- use of metaphors or figurative language
- reflection
- lies or stretched truths

Your "story truth" should sound like and imitate the stories O'Brien tells (or stories his characters tell).

Your "story truth" should be at least one page in length and include:

- deviations from facts or 'truths' in "happening truth"
- plentiful use of figurative language (metaphors, imagery, personification, etc.)
- dialogue
- reflections or commentary on meanings or morals

## **Chapter Eighteen: "Good Form"**

1. Discuss your opinion of the following passage:

"I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth."

## **Chapter Nineteen: "Field Trip"**

1. According to O'Brien, "The war was as remote to [his daughter] as cavemen and dinosaurs."

After reading this book, do you feel closer to or more remote from the war in Vietnam? Why?

2. What do you think O'Brien meant when he said, "In a way, maybe, I'd gone under with Kiowa, and now after two decades I'd finally worked my way out?"

3. Do you think writing this book (and his other books about his Vietnam experience) helped O'Brien "[work] his way out"?

## **Chapter Twenty: "The Ghost Soldiers"**

1. Are you surprised when O'Brien writes "I'd turned mean inside. Even a little cruel at times .... I now felt a deep coldness inside me, something dark and beyond reason. It's a hard thing to admit ... I was capable of evil"? Why or why not?

2. Other than soldiers, what people might feel this way? Why?

3. Discuss "what terror was."

