

Glossary of Terms: *The Things They Carried*

“The Things They Carried”

rucksack A kind of knapsack strapped over the shoulders.

foxhole A hole dug in the ground as a temporary protection for one or two soldiers against enemy gunfire or tanks.

perimeter A boundary strip where defenses are set up.

heat tabs Fuel pellets used for heating C rations.

C rations A canned ration used in the field in World War II.

R & R Rest and recuperation, leave.

Than Khe (also Khe Sahn) A major battle in the Tet Offensive, the siege lasted well over a month in the beginning of 1968. Khe Sahn was thought of as an important strategic location for both the Americans and the North Vietnamese. American forces were forced to withdraw from Khe Sahn.

SOP Abbreviation for standard operating procedure.

RTO Radio telephone operator who carried a lightweight infantry field radio.

grunt A U.S. infantryman.

hump To travel on foot, especially when carrying and transporting necessary supplies for field combat.

platoon A military unit composed of two or more squads or sections, normally under the command of a lieutenant: it is a subdivision of a company, troop, and so on.

medic A medical noncommissioned officer who gives first aid in combat; aidman; corpsman.

M-60 American-made machine gun.

PFC Abbreviation for Private First Class.

Spec 4 Specialist Rank, having no command function; soldier who carries out orders.

M-16 The standard American rifle used in Vietnam after 1966.

flak jacket A vestlike, bulletproof jacket worn by soldiers.

KIA Abbreviation for killed in action, to be killed in the line of duty.

chopper A helicopter.

dustoff Medical evacuation by helicopter.

Claymore antipersonnel mine An antipersonnel mine that scatters shrapnel in a particular, often fan-shaped, area when it explodes.

Starlight scope A night-vision telescope that enables a user to see in the dark.

tunnel complexes The use of tunnels by the Viet Cong as hiding places, caches for food and weapons, headquarter complexes and protection against air strikes and artillery fire was a characteristic of the Vietnam war.

The Stars and Stripes A newsletter-style publication produced for servicemen by the U.S. Army.

Bronze Star A U.S. military decoration awarded for heroic or meritorious achievement or service in combat not involving aerial flight.

Purple Heart A U.S. military decoration awarded to members of the armed forces wounded or killed in action by or against an enemy: established in 1782 and re-established in 1932.

entrenching tool A shovel-like tool, among its other uses, used to dig temporary fortifications such as foxholes.

zapped Killed.

freedom bird Any aircraft which returned servicemen to the U.S.

sin loi From Vietnamese, literally meaning excuse me, though servicemen came to understand the term as meaning too bad or tough luck.

“Spin”

FREE Designation written by servicemen in the upper-right corner of an envelope in place of stamps; soldiers were allowed to mail items free of charge.

Poppa-san An old Vietnamese man.

in the pink In good physical condition; healthy; fit.

AWOL Absent without leave.

Da Nang Seaport in central Vietnam, on the South China Sea; many battalions were stationed there.

truth goose A fictitious story that feels as real as the truth.

bodybag A rubberized bag sealed with a zipper, used for transporting a dead body from a war zone, accident, etc.

paddies Rice fields.

buck sergeant stripes Embroidered patches sewn on to uniforms to signify the enlisted army rank, also known as E5.

My Khe A huge beach nestled between a forest and the Kinh River.

”On the Rainy River”

The Lone Ranger Famous cowboy hero and the star of first a radio show and then a television show in the 1940s and 1950s.

USS Maddox American destroyer stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin.

Gulf of Tonkin Arm of the South China Sea between Hainan Island and the coasts of Southern China and Northern Vietnam. Location where North Vietnamese forces attacked and sunk two American ships in 1964. Afterwards, Congress passed the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, authorizing military action in Southeast Asia.

Ho Chi Minh (1890–1969; born Nguyen That Thanh) President of North Vietnam (1954–1969).

Geneva Accords Established in 1954, the Geneva Accords were rules which governed military action and treatment of captured soldiers.

SEATO Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (1955–1976).

Cold War Hostility and sharp conflict as in diplomacy and economics between states, without actual warfare.

dominoes Refers here to the “domino effect” or “domino theory,” which was the prevalent course of foreign policy adopted by the United States during the Cold War. The notion was that if one area or nation “fell” to Communist forces, that the surrounding areas would also “fall” under Communist influences, like dominoes toppling over.

Gene McCarthy (b. 1916) Eugene McCarthy, a World War II veteran, served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1948 to 1958 and the U.S. Senate from 1958 to 1968. In 1968, he ran for the Democratic presidential nomination, winning the New Hampshire primary, a factor in Lyndon Johnson’s decision not to seek re-election. McCarthy supported the Vietnam War at first, voting in favor of the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, but by 1968, he strongly opposed the war.

draft notice Official notice sent by the Selective Service System, informing a young man to report for an armed forces physical exam. The first step to being drafted into the armed forces.

Phi Beta Kappa An honorary society of U.S. college students in liberal arts and sciences with high scholastic rank; a member of this society.

summa cum laude With the greatest praise: a phrase signifying above-average academic standing at the time of graduation from a college or university: the highest of three categories.

jingo A person who boasts of his patriotism and favors an aggressive, threatening, warlike foreign policy; chauvinist.

graduate school deferment Men in graduate school who maintained a high enough GPA (grade point average) could defer the draft and remain in school in the U.S.

National Guard In the U.S., the organized militia forces of the individual states, a component of the Army of the U.S. when called into active federal service.

reserves Personnel or units in the armed forces not on active duty but subject to call; last resort troops, usually remained in the U.S.

CO Conscientious objector. A designation for legal exemption from military combat service due to moral or personal ideological conflict.

Bao Dai (1913–1997, meaning “Keeper or Preserver of Greatness”) Bao Dai was the last of the Nguyen Emperors.

Diem Ngo Dinh Diem (1901–1963), first president of South Vietnam (1955–1963).

Saint George Patron saint of England.

LBJ Lyndon B. Johnson (1908–1973) 36th president of the United States (1963–1969).

Huck Finn Protagonist from the novel *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* by Mark Twain marked by his plucky and rebellious spirit.

Abbie Hoffman (1936–1989) A countercultural icon of the 1960s, Abbie Hoffman was successful at turning many flower children into political activists.

Jane Fonda (b. 1937) Actress and sex symbol who toured Vietnam in 1972; she became a vocal anti-war activist and was harshly criticized by some veterans for her political position on the war.

Gary Cooper (1901–1961) film actor characterized by a rugged masculine quality well known for his roles in Westerns such as *High Noon* (1952). He also appeared in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1943) and *Sergeant York* (1941).

Plato's *Republic* Central text of Western thought in which the Greek philosopher Plato outlines the construction of the ideal political city and leader.

“Enemies”

jackknife A large pocketknife.

LZ Gator Landing zone south of Chu Lai.

pull guard To be assigned to a sentinel shift, to keep watch.

wheelchair wound A permanently debilitating wound, especially loss of limbs or wounds which would cause paralysis.

rigged mortar round A short-range weapon that fires a shell on a high trajectory.

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“How to Tell a True War Story”

cooze A derogatory name for a woman.

yellow mother To be a coward or have failure of nerve.

Quang Ngai City and province near Da Nang.

listening post (LP) An advanced, concealed position near the enemy's lines, for detecting the enemy's movements by listening. Here, a three-man post placed outside the barbed wire surrounding a firebase to detect enemy movement in order to warn and defend the perimeter.

Radio Hanoi Like National Public Radio in the U.S., Radio Hanoi was a national radio broadcast. Jane Fonda spoke on Radio Hanoi during her visit to Vietnam in 1972.

gook Slang term for a person of East Asian descent, here meaning, specifically, a Vietnamese.

arty Artillery.

air strikes Air attacks on a ground or naval target.

napalm Sodium palmitate or an aluminum soap added to gasoline or oil to form a jellylike substance; used in flame throwers and bombs.

Cobras A type of helicopter used to attack enemy troops.

F-4s Also called the Phantom II, a type of tactical fighter bomber widely used in the Vietnam War.

Willie Peter White phosphorus mortar or artillery rounds.

HE High explosive.

tracer rounds A harmless projectile that lights a path for soldiers to aim projectile weaponry.

illumination rounds Flares dropped from above or fired from the ground used to light up an area during darkness.

Lemon Tree A song popularized in the 1960s by folk music group Peter, Paul and Mary. The song tells of a father warning his son about falling in love too deeply with a seemingly ideal girl, with the cautionary moral being that what appears sweet may actually be sour.

puffery Exaggerated praise.

“The Dentist”

Chu Lai Site where many troops were stationed.

AO Area of operations.

dog tag A military identification tag worn about the neck.

“Sweetheart of Song Tra Bong”

culottes A woman’s or girl’s garment consisting of trousers made full in the legs to resemble a skirt.

rear-echelon A subdivision of a military force, farthest from the enemy.

NCO Noncommissioned officer.

E-6 An enlisted man’s grade.

RFs, PFs Regional forces of S. Vietnam, also called Ruff-Puffs.

ARVN Army of the Republic of Vietnam (Army of S. Vietnam).

Green Beret A member of the Special Forces of the U.S. Army, the “Green Berets” (from the *green beret* worn as part of the uniform).

EM Enlisted man.

C-130 (Hercules) Aircraft that primarily performs the tactical portion of an airlift mission. It can operate from rough dirt strips and is the prime transport for airdropping troops and equipment into hostile areas.

USO United Service Organizations, a civilian arm of the U.S. Army that offered diversions and entertainment for soldiers both on the homefront and in active combat areas overseas.

hootch Military slang for a place to live in, specifically a shack or thatched hut, as in Vietnam.

Sterno Trademark for gelatinized methyl alcohol with nitrocellulose, sold in cans as a fuel for small stoves or chafing dishes.

ville A small village or group of huts in rural Vietnam.

AK-47 Basic infantry weapon of the NVA and Viet Cong.

Darvon A white, crystalline, narcotic analgesic used for the alleviation of moderate pain.

joss sticks Thin sticks of dried paste made of fragrant wood dust, a kind of incense.

MP Military Police.

CID Criminal Investigation Department.

“Stockings”

Bouncing Betty An explosive that propels upward from the ground and then detonates.

“Church”

pagoda In India and the Far East, a temple in the form of a pyramidal tower of several stories, usually an odd number, commonly built over a sacred relic or as a work of devotion.

Friar Tuck The religious leader of Robin Hood’s gang of Merry Men, from the English folk tale, *Robin Hood*.

di di mau A Vietnamese phrase meaning to move quickly.

“The Man Killed”

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“Speaking of Courage”

Silver Star A U.S. military decoration in the form of a bronze star with a small silver star at the center, awarded for gallantry in action.

Combat Infantryman’s Badge An award designed for enlisted men and below who have served in active combat zones.

Air Medal A U.S. military decoration awarded for meritorious achievement during participation in aerial operations.

Army Commendation Medal Awarded to any member of the Armed Forces of the U.S., other than general officers, who, while serving in any capacity after December 6, 1941, distinguished himself by heroism, meritorious achievement or meritorious service.

Good Conduct Medal A U.S. military decoration awarded for exemplary behavior, efficiency, and fidelity.

Vietnam Campaign Medal Awarded to personnel who meet one of the following requirements: (1) served in Vietnam for six months during the period of March 1, 1961 and March 28, 1973, (2) served outside Vietnam and contributed direct combat support to Vietnam and Armed Forces for six months, or (3) six months service is not required for individuals who were wounded by hostile forces; killed in action or otherwise in line of duty; or captured by hostile forces.

ribbons Strips of cloth, often of many colors, worn on the left breast of a military uniform to indicate an award of a decoration or medal.

bivouacked Encamped in the open, with only tents or improvised shelter.

shrapnel Any fragments scattered by an exploding shell or bomb.

carhop A waiter or, especially, a waitress who serves food to customers in cars at a drive-in restaurant.

the Y Abbreviation for the Young Men's Christian Association. A social center for recreational activities.

seven honeys Seven medals.

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“In the Field”

MIA Missing in action. A person in the armed forces who is lost during combat and who cannot be accounted for as a known casualty.

GI Member of the U.S. armed forces; especially an enlisted soldier.

Karl (Heinrich) Marx (1818–1883) German social philosopher and economist. Marx was the founder of modern socialism.

“Field Trip”

Ho Chi Minh’s mausoleum Burial place of Ho Chi Minh, Vietnamese leader and first president of North Vietnam (1954–1969). His army was victorious in the French Indochina War (1946–1954), and he later led North Vietnam's struggle to defeat the U.S.-supported government in South Vietnam.

“The Ghost Soldier”

Gene Autry (1907–1998) Western movie star known as the “Singing Cowboy.”

shipped off to Japan To be sent to an American military hospital in Japan, usually for serious wounds.

gangrene Decay of tissue in a part of the body when the blood supply is obstructed by injury or disease.

VC Viet Cong.

Highway 1 Major thoroughway for transportation through Vietnam.

Harmon Killebrew (b. 1936) a baseball player known as a power hitter who slugged home runs. He had a 22-year career with Washington, Minnesota, and Kansas City.

boonies Boondocks; hinterland.

stand-down A period of rest for combat soldiers during which they return to a base and halt all operations except security.

salt tabs Tablets made of salt that servicemen placed along the inside of their cheeks to forestall dehydration by hastening the production of saliva.

a couple of clicks Two kilometers.

Charlie Cong Viet Cong.

Mary Hopkins Folk singer from the mid-1960s whose hit single was “Those Were the Days” from the album *Postcards*.

trip flare A flare rigged to ignite when an intruder moves a thin wire hidden along the outside perimeter of a base or encampment meant to signal the approach of enemy troops.

American Legion An organization of veterans of the armed forces of the U.S., founded in 1919.

“Night Life”

Nam Shorthand for the Vietnam War, used by soldiers and veterans.

No Doz Caffeine pills used to keep one awake.

defoliant A chemical substance that causes leaves to fall from growing plants.

DDT A powerful insecticide effective upon contact; its use is restricted by law due to damaging environmental effects.

snipe hunt A futile search for something that does not exist.

“The Lives of the Dead”

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