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**To what extent is war culture reflected through the actions of the soldiers in Tim O’Brien’s *The Things They Carried*?**

In *The Things They Carried*, Tim O’Brien puts together a collection of short stories to illustrate the lives of American soldiers in the Vietnam War. Through the use of brutally accurate diction, O’Brien vividly paints both scenes of combat and the way soldiers feel and act behind the front lines. By descriptively narrating the tale from different points of view in a non-chronological fashion, the reader is given a rather complete picture of the way grief, terror, and joy find ways into soldiers’ lives. By expressing the sentiments and actions of ordinary soldiers, war culture is heavily referenced and reflected throughout the text.

The emotional baggage that the soldiers carried is an expression of war culture in *The Things They Carried*. The title itself, “The Things They Carried”, is less of an account of the physical burdens soldiers had and more of a reference to the emotional baggage that soldiers were strapped to. For example, “[the soldiers] carried the soldier’s greatest fear, which was the fear of blushing. Men killed, and died, because they were embarrassed not to” (O’Brien 20). The highly masculine aspect of war culture can hence be seen through the acts of bravery carried out by soldiers. Their unwillingness to express their fear is a way in which the emotional burden of war culture binds them and forces them to behave in a certain way. At the same time, not only fear, but also responsibility, mentally strains men of war. In war, every soldier has a responsibility for every other soldier near them. For example, both Curt Lemon and Kiowa’s death are directly or indirectly caused by blunders or irresponsibility on part by another soldier in the platoon. When searching for Kiowa’s dead body, platoon leader Jimmy Cross mentally asserts that he “did not want the responsibility of leading [his soldiers]” (O’Brien 160). The times when soldiers care for the well-being of others can be attributed to the implicit stress of responsibility which defines war culture. For example, Rat Kiley’s actions as a medic necessitates responsibility because the well-being of others in the platoon depends on him. In a parallel manner, it also necessitates the bravery to act promptly in dire situations. In this way, the psychological strains of fear and responsibility are intertwined and define war culture, which dictates the actions of soldiers in war.

War culture does not only define the actions of soldiers through emotional strains; it also reflects itself through rituals and practices among soldiers which have been slowly shaped over time. For example, when inspecting the remains of an air strike on a village along the South China Sea, the company comes across a dead old man. Dave Jenson walked over “and shook the old man’s hand… One by one the others did it too” (O’Brien 214). It was a type of peculiar war culture which had developed among platoon members. Over time, certain practices begin to develop among soldiers, and these special forms of war culture define individual groups of men in war. Actions from solemnly greeting a dead body to horseplay are actions of soldiers which are also part of war culture. When Azar mimics the dance moves of a girl, Henry Dobbins “took Azar from behind and lifted him up high and carried him over to a deep well” (O’Brien 130). This type of casual interaction between soldiers is characteristic of the relationships that have stemmed between them due to war. As seen, war culture that has developed individually among soldiers is also greatly reflected in their actions.

Sources:

OBrien, Tim. The Things They Carried. Houghton Mifflin, 1990.