**At a Glance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approximate Grade Range:</th>
<th>2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genre:</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic:</td>
<td>Soldiers under stressful conditions in Vietnam try to justify their actions and reflect on how to &quot;tell a true war story.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author:</td>
<td>Tim O'Brien</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source:</td>
<td><em>The Things They Carried</em> (1990)</td>
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</table>

**Difficulty Index:**

- **Considerate**
- **Challenging**

**Structure:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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**Richness:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationships:</th>
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<tr>
<th>Vocabulary:</th>
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<th>Style:</th>
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**Lexile Measure:** 610L

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In the following excerpt, from Tim O'Brien's novel *The Things They Carried*, soldier Mitchell Sanders tells the story of six soldiers who get "spooked" while on patrol in the jungle. After spending more than a week "listening" for the enemy, the soldiers begin to hear all kinds of music coming from an unknown location. They eventually have the entire area bombed, killing every living thing within range. After telling this story, Sanders reflects on the "truth" of the story he told.

**How to Tell a True War Story**

*from the novel *The Things They Carried* by Tim O'Brien*

1. You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end. Not then, not ever. Not when Mitchell Sanders stood up and moved into the dark.

2. It all happened.

3. Even now, at this instant, I remember that yo-yo. In a way, I suppose, you had to be there, you had to hear it, but I could tell how desperately Sanders wanted me to believe him, his frustration at not quite getting the details right, not quite pinning down the final and definitive truth.

4. And I remember sitting at my foxhole that night, watching the shadows of Quang Ngai, thinking about the coming day and how we would cross the river and march west into the mountains, all the ways I might die, all the things I did not understand.

5. Late in the night Mitchell Sanders touched my shoulder.


7. And then again, in the morning, Sanders came up to me.

---

1 *LP:* listening patrol
The platoon was preparing to move out, checking weapons, going through all the little rituals that preceded a day's march. Already the lead squad had crossed the river and was filing off toward the west.

8  "I got a confession to make," Sanders said. "Last night, man, I had to make up a few things."
9  "I know that."
10  "The glee club. There wasn't any glee club."
11  "Right."
12  "No opera."
13  "Forget it, I understand."
14  "Yeah, but listen, it's still true. Those six guys, they heard wicked sounds out there. They heard sounds you just plain won't believe."
15  Sanders pulled on his rucksack, closed his eyes for a moment, then almost smiled at me. I knew what was coming.
16  "All right," I said, "what's the moral?"
17  "Forget it."
18  "No, go ahead."
19  For a long while he was quiet, looking away, and the silence kept stretching out until it was almost embarrassing. Then he shrugged and gave me a stare that lasted all day.
20  "Hear that quiet, man?" he said. "That quiet—just listen. There's your moral."

21  In a true war story, if there's a moral at all, it's like the thread that makes the cloth. You can't tease it out. You can't extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there's nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe "Oh."
22  True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis.
23  For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can't believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside.
24  It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.

Spotlight On: Tim O'Brien

Tim O'Brien earned a Purple Heart medal for his two years of fighting in the Vietnam War. Interestingly, he writes fictional accounts of the war, and explains his reasoning for this as follows: "It's kind of a semantic game: lying versus truth-telling. One doesn't lie for the sake of lying, one doesn't invent merely for the sake of inventing. One does it for a particular purpose and that purpose always is to arrive at some kind of spiritual truth that one can't discover simply by recording the world as it is."

O'Brien's novels have received much acclaim for their profound studies of men at war. Going After Cacciato won the 1979 National Book Award in Fiction, In the Lake of the Woods was selected as best novel of 1994 by 'Time' magazine, and The Things They Carried was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Critics Circle Award.
### Teacher Guide for FAST-R Passage: How to Tell a True War Story

The annotated answer key below highlights common reasons students might choose each answer, and the sidebar gives more insight into the question types to help you understand patterns of student responses. Always make time to follow up with students in conferences or small groups to probe their thinking, teach in response to patterns, and help them apply effective reading and thinking strategies to their everyday reading.

Note: You may find it helpful to refer to the "Types and Levels of Questions on FAST-R" sheet from your teacher resource folder as you examine your students' responses. The icon in the right-hand column, below, corresponds to that sheet's more detailed explanations of the kinds of thinking each type of question asks of readers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer Key</th>
<th>Type of Question</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| 1. According to the passage, what was the narrator thinking about as he sat in his foxhole that night? | A. his girlfriend (OOP2, ¶6)  
✓ B. all the ways he might die (¶4)  
C. Mitchell Sanders (OOP2, ¶5)  
D. the long journey home (OOB) | FE1: Identify evidence explicitly stated in the text |
| 2. What is the purpose of paragraphs 1-6?                                 | ✓ A. to depict the night when Sanders told the narrator his story  
B. to describe the Vietnam landscape (OOB)  
C. to explain the bond of friendship between Sanders and the narrator (OOB)  
D. to explain the moral of true war stories (OOP2, ¶6) | MI2: Determine a singular meaning from the sum total of a particular paragraph |
| 3. Which of the following does the author tell us about first?             | ✓ A. what the narrator was doing before Sanders told his story (OOP1, ¶4)  
B. how Sanders woke him up to tell his story (OOP1, ¶5)  
C. how Sanders begins telling his story (OOP1, ¶6)  
D. what Sanders does when he is done telling the story (¶1) | MI3: Determine implicit meaning by understanding the organization of information in the text |
| 4. According to the narrator, Sanders’ GREATEST frustration is           | A. not getting the details of the story right. (OOP1, ¶3)  
✓ B. not telling the truth. (OOP1, ¶3)  
C. listening to war stories. (OOB)  
D. not telling a believable story. (¶3) | FE2: Recognize the explicit meaning from varied wording in the text |
| 5. When Sanders tells the narrator that he made up some details in his story, he called this his                      | ✓ A. war story. (OOP1 ¶1)  
✓ B. confession. (¶8)  
C. opera. (OOP1 ¶12)  
D. moral. (OOP1 ¶6) | FE1: Identify evidence explicitly stated in the text |
### Grades 10-11 • Fiction • “How to Tell a True War Story”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Correct Answer(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6. In paragraph 7, what is the author’s purpose in using the phrase “little rituals”?</td>
<td>✓ A. to show how preparing for death had become routine (¶7)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>B. to explain why Sanders decided to confess (OOP1, ¶8)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>C. to describe how the soldiers prayed before leaving on a march (OOB)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>D. to point out that there are not many tasks involved in preparing for a march</td>
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<td></td>
<td>(OOP2, ¶7)</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. What was it that Sanders MOST wanted the narrator to believe?</td>
<td>✓ C. that the six men were justified in bombing the whole area (¶14, italics</td>
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<td></td>
<td>preceding passage)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>D. that Quang Ngai is a great place to die (OOB)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What does the narrator believe is the only thing to say in response to a “true war story”?</td>
<td>✓ D. “Oh.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What is meant by the statement, “True war stories do not generalize” in paragraph 22?</td>
<td>✓ C. True war stories focus on the details. (¶22, 23, 24)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>D. True war stories always have a moral. (OOP2, ¶21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. The author of the book this story comes from spent two years in the Vietnam War, yet he insists all of the Vietnam stories he writes are purely fiction. Based on this passage, what is the most likely reason Tim O’Brien only writes fictional war stories?</td>
<td>✓ D. to get at the spiritual truth that lies beyond the telling of events as they actually happened (¶21-24, italics preceding passage, author background info)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How to Tell a True War Story

In the following excerpt, from Tim O’Brien’s novel The Things They Carried, soldier Mitchell Sanders tells the story of six soldiers who get “spooked” while on patrol in the jungle. After spending more than a week listening for signs of the enemy, the soldiers begin to hear all kinds of music coming from an unknown location. They eventually have the entire area bombed, killing every living thing within range. After telling this story, Sanders reflects on the “truth” of the story he told.

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2 It all happened.

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1 LP: listening patrol

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And then again, in the morning, Sanders came up to me. The platoon was preparing to move out, checking weapons, going through all the little rituals that preceded a day’s march. Already the lead squad had crossed the river and was filing off toward the west.

“I got a confession to make,” Sanders said. “Last night, man, I had to make up a few things.”

“I know that.”

“The glee club. There wasn’t any glee club.”

“Right.”

“No opera.”

“Forget it, I understand.”

“Yeah, but listen, it’s still true. Those six guys, they heard wicked sounds out there. They heard sounds you just plain won’t believe.”

Sanders pulled on his rucksack, closed his eyes for a moment, then almost smiled at me. I knew what was coming.

“All right,” I said, “what’s the moral?”

“Forget it.”

“No, go ahead.”

For a long while he was quiet, looking away, and the silence kept stretching out until it was almost embarrassing. Then he shrugged and gave me a stare that lasted all day.

“Hear that quiet, man?” he said. “That quiet—just listen. There’s your moral.”

In a true war story, if there’s a moral at all, it’s like the thread that makes the cloth. You can’t tease it out. You can’t extract the meaning without unraveling the deeper meaning. And in the end, really, there’s nothing much to say about a true war story, except maybe “Oh.”

True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis.

For example: War is hell. As a moral declaration the old truism seems perfectly true, and yet because it abstracts, because it generalizes, I can’t believe it with my stomach. Nothing turns inside.

It comes down to gut instinct. A true war story, if truly told, makes the stomach believe.

\(^2\) **glee club**: a group of people organized to perform short pieces of choral music
Directions: Answer the following multiple-choice questions by filling in the circle for the best answer on your answer sheet.

1. According to the passage, what was the narrator thinking about as he sat in his foxhole that night?
   A. his girlfriend
   B. all the ways he might die
   C. Mitchell Sanders
   D. the long journey home

2. What is the purpose of paragraphs 1-6?
   A. to depict the night when Sanders told the narrator his story
   B. to describe the Vietnam landscape
   C. to explain the bond of friendship between Sanders and the narrator
   D. to explain the moral of true war stories

3. Which of the following does the author tell us about first?
   A. what the narrator was doing before Sanders told his story
   B. how Sanders woke him up to tell his story
   C. how Sanders begins telling his story
   D. what Sanders does when he is done telling the story

4. According to the narrator, Sanders’ GREATEST frustration is
   A. not getting the details of the story right.
   B. not telling the truth.
   C. listening to war stories.
   D. not telling a believable story.

5. When Sanders admits to the narrator that he made up some details in his story, he called this his
   A. war story.
   B. confession.
   C. opera.
   D. moral.
6. In paragraph 7, what is the author’s purpose in using the phrase “little rituals”?
   A. to show how preparing for death had become routine  
   B. to explain why Sanders decided to confess  
   C. to describe how the soldiers prayed before leaving on a march  
   D. to point out that there are not many tasks involved in preparing for a march

7. What was it that Sanders MOST wanted the narrator to believe?
   A. how important it is to listen to your enemy  
   B. his confession  
   C. that the six men were justified in bombing the whole area  
   D. that Quang Ngai is a great place to die

8. What does the narrator believe is the only thing to say in response to a “true war story”?
   A. “Forget it, I understand.”  
   B. “Right.”  
   C. “You’re so brave.”  
   D. “Oh.”

9. What is meant by the statement, “True war stories do not generalize” in paragraph 22?
   A. They do not indulge in analysis.  
   B. There’s nothing much to say about a true war story.  
   C. True war stories focus on the details.  
   D. True war stories always have a moral.

10. The author, Tim O’Brien, spent two years in the Vietnam War, yet he insists all of the Vietnam stories he writes are purely fiction. Based on this passage, what is the most likely reason O’Brien only writes fictional war stories?
    A. It’s too difficult to write about his own experiences.  
    B. He doesn’t think true war stories can be understood by people who haven’t been in battle.  
    C. He thought more people would read fictional stories.  
    D. He wants to get at a type of truth beyond re-telling events as they actually happened.
### FAST-R Answer Sheet

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>Grade</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passage Title</td>
<td>Teacher Name</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Completely fill the circle for the correct answer.

1. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D
2. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D
3. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D
4. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D
5. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D
6. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D
7. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D
8. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D
9. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D
10. [ ] A  [ ] B  [ ] C  [ ] D

Write your answer to the open response prompt in the lined space below if your teacher directs you to do so.

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### OFFICE USE ONLY

- RESEARCH: Y N
- OPEN RESPONSE: 1 2 3 4