

A passage from
Escape from Saigon a Novel
by
Michael Morris & Dick Pirozzolo

Sam Esposito thought about going to graduate school, then maybe work on a doctorate, hoping by that time the Vietnam War would be over. But he never got around to applying. He also liked the idea of flying, but since he had 20/200 eyesight, it was a sure bet he could not avoid the draft by becoming a fighter pilot like the Naval Reserve Officer Training students on campus. So he simply left things to chance.

When graduation day finally arrived, it was gloriously sunny in New Haven.

Sam's parents had driven from Norwalk to see him receive his diploma. President John F. Kennedy delivered the commencement address. After the ceremony, Sam and his parents got to shake hands with the president. Then, Sam's mother, who had promised his father not to mar Sam's day, couldn't hold it in any longer: "Sam, I'm sorry," she said tearfully as she handed him a letter that had arrived from the local draft board that morning.

The decision had been made for him, so Sam resigned himself to a two-year stint in the Army. He dutifully appeared for his physical exam, where he was asked, "Did anyone ever tell you that you have a heart murmur?" Sam was reclassified 1-Y, which meant he could be called to fight only in a national emergency. The Army was out. Flying was out. Since he'd written a few articles for the school paper, Sam figured news writing was something he could do. So he went down to the UPI office in New Haven where the bureau chief, Parker Reines III, offered him a job as a reporter for seventy-five dollars a week.

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Reines wore bow ties and walked with a walrus tusk-handled cane. He had been bureau chief since 1955. Reines criticized Sam mercilessly. "Too many adjectives," he would say. "You buried your lead. Percent is one word, not hyphenated. It's police, not THE police."

When Sam got a break from reporting, he read the news copy that came by Telex over the international wire. Increasingly the news was about Vietnam. On June 2, the South was winning. On June 3, South Vietnam was losing a key battle over some peninsula he couldn't pronounce. A week later it looked like the war was spreading to Laos. He had to check the atlas to find out where Laos was.

He learned that South Vietnam reports of minor victories were doctored. In one case, sixty captured North Vietnamese Army regulars turned out to be women and children. During that time Viet Cong became a new term in his vocabulary, synonymous with assassinations, killing rampages, and torture. Twelve thousand American military advisors were being sent to help the South Vietnamese fight them.

"Advisors my ass," Reines sneered when he saw those reports. "They're kids who still need advice from their mothers, and they're going to get killed."

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A few days before Thanksgiving in 1963, Sam ran into Billy Freda, a kid from his

neighborhood. Billy was home after a one-year tour in Vietnam and Sam wanted to know what it was really like over there.

“Come on,” he said to Billy. “Let’s take a drive over to Temple Street. We’ll hit Mory’s for a couple of beers then maybe Pepe’s for a slice later.”

While they sat and drank at one of the old carved-up wood tables in Mory’s, all Billy wanted to do was reminisce about the time Norwalk beat West Haven by one point in the biggest game of his high school basketball career. But after a few beers Billy opened up and began to talk about his time in Vietnam.

“I’ve never seen anything like it, Sam,” he said. “We got these ‘Ricans in our unit. I mean *had* them in our unit. They’re all KIA now. Anyway, because they’re built small, Sarge sends them down

into these tunnels where we think the gooks are hiding.” Billy’s eyes widened as he went on, “Then the Viet Cong sets booby traps all over the place. They bury sharpened bamboo stakes in a pit— punji sticks, they call them—and cover the pit with a burlap bag and dead leaves. One of my buddies fell into one on patrol. They had to amputate both his legs. It wasn’t the wound—they could have fixed that. It was the infection. Those little fuckers coated the stakes with their own shit.”

Sam let Billy ramble on, recounting one war story after another.

“So let me see if I’ve got this right,” Sam said. “They’ve got guys in pajamas fighting us on the ground with sharpened sticks straight out of the Stone Age, while the Russians are giving their pals—the North Vietnamese—radar-controlled surface-to-air missiles and MiG-15s. On top of this, the North Vietnamese Army is invading through Laos and Cambodia, carrying weapons on bicycles and elephants.” The incongruity was lost on Billy.

“Here’s how I see it, Sam. Do we want to fight them over *there* or fight them over *here*? I say over there is better and I’m going back for a second tour. I’ll be fighting to save your ass from the commies. So this round’s on you, Sam!”

“Sure. Beer’s on me. And if I see the Western Union guy on our street, let’s hope he’s not there to see your mom.”

“Sam, I gotta go back. I have to. I feel like shit in the States. All my friends are gone. When I’m there, man, I feel right. Like how I felt when we beat West Haven with one second on the clock. And Billy Freda scores the winning point. *HOORAH!*”

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