

WALLACE TERRY

*Wally Terry, who graduated from Brown University and was editor of the school's daily paper, worked as a reporter for the Washington Post and Time magazine, and was the author of Bloods, a bestseller about black servicemen in the Vietnam War.*¹¹¹

I first went to Vietnam on assignment for *Time* magazine in March of 1967. This led to a cover story dealing with the performance of the black soldier in our first fully integrated war. When I didn't wilt under fire, *Time* asked me to return later that year.

For many reasons, 1968 was not a good time for me. Eight years into my profession, I had seen too much death, covering the civil rights movement and the urban riots. Close friends like NAACP leader Medgar Evers and a white minister, Jim Reeb, had been murdered in the South. Dr. Martin Luther King, my son's godfather, would be next. Now I would be back in Vietnam. When, I wondered, would God lower the curtain on my play?

Saigon, 1968. I am living at the Embassy Hotel. I am hungry for a guide to Vietnamese culture, and I find one—John Cantwell, a *Time* correspondent from Australia. He loves Asia, its people, its languages. He can speak three dialects of Chinese. We are like roommates because we are the only *Time* reporters staying at the hotel.

One night, John and I take a bagful of hamburgers up to the roof of the hotel to watch the rocket attacks and flare drops around the city. We decide this is one war we don't want to lose our lives in.

"What would happen to my wife and kids," John says to me. "It would be bloody stupid."

For both of us, Vietnam is making less sense each day.

Once a champion weight lifter, John still stuffs himself with vitamins, drinks only fruit juice, and carries around a portable chest expander. He relishes guns but not as much as the birds he keeps in our office at the *Time* villa. He loves to stand at the top of the stairs whistling at them, trying to coax them to sing.

May 4.

The Communists have stopped shelling for a few days. In that brief respite, I decide it is safe enough for my wife, Janice, to make her first visit to Saigon from Singapore where we've rented an apartment for her and our three children. Her plane arrives in the afternoon. John and I take her to dinner. John spins us tales of his journeys to Phnom Penh and Vientiane.

May 5, 4 A.M.

Saigon is shaken by rounds of mortars and rockets. It sounds like the Tet offensive all over again. John and I agree there's nothing we can do while it's still dark. We decide to meet at 8:00 at the *Time* villa.

8 A.M.

We don't have much time before the deadline on this story. One of us has to get to a military briefing at the public affairs office, and one of us has to see what damage has been done to the city. I tell John to go to the briefing. I will look around the streets.

"No, man," John says. "Janice is here. She'll be frightened. You should stay with her. I'll go out."

He insists.

"Okay," I say. "But whatever you do, stay away from Tan Son Nhut and Cholon, the Chinese sector of the city."

"Sure, sure," he says.

8:20 A.M.

On his way out, John runs into another journalist, Frank Palmos. Palmos asks if he can come along. Then three more reporters—Bruce Piggot and Ronald Laramy of Reuters and Michael Birch of the Australian Associated Press—want to come too.

All five pile into the Mini-Moke, a small jeep, and set out, following the Saigon River. John drives straight into the Cholon sector.

9:30 A.M.

Frank Palmos, visibly shaken, his clothes torn, staggers into the villa.

"They're all dead," he cries out.

I'm stunned. I call Janice. I need help. I can't find anyone to help me go get John.

Worried, Janice puts in a call to Zalin Grant. He and I had worked together in *Time's* Washington bureau, and he has just returned to Saigon as a correspondent for the *New Republic*.

Zalin—we call him "Zip"—had done his military service as an army intelligence officer and was then hired by *Time*, one of the few newsmen who could speak Vietnamese. In 1967 he came back home and, in one of his first stateside assignments, stood up to black rioters in Newark. That's when I met him—at the *Time* Washington bureau.

Gutsy little white dude, I thought. He wore handmade Italian suits and drove a Porsche. *Cocksure of himself, too*, I thought.

Zip had picked up his nickname playing football. We played some touch together. He wasn't bad. But he couldn't play basketball worth a lick. And when he opened his mouth, out fell the grits. A Southerner! From South Carolina!

I had grown up in Indiana, afraid of the South. And after I saw the former slave markets on a trip to Charleston, I had nightmares. But it was Zip's character that made me forget his accent. He was tough, brave, and fair.

When Janice phones Zip, she says, "Something has happened to Cantwell. Wally needs you."

"Where is he?" is all Zip says.

Palmos's story.

When Zip arrives at the villa, I pour some scotch into a paper cup, put it in Palmos's hand, and ask him to tell his story.

They had driven five miles from the center of downtown Saigon into Cholon, he says, after they caught sight of two helicopter gunships rocketing against an enemy force. They left the main road, Tran Quoc Toan, for a side street, Minh Phung. John then turned off onto a dirt road, No. 46. There, they ran into scores of Vietnamese fleeing.

"We drove against them," Palmos says.

An old lady shouted, "VC! VC! Go back."

John drove fifty more yards. Two figures holding rifles moved to the center of the road. Another figure appeared from behind an oil drum with an AK-47 assault rifle. John stopped the Mini-Moke, turned off the engine, and raised his hands in surrender.

He kept saying, "*Bao chi. Bao chi.*" Press. Press.

It was a Viet Cong suicidal strike force. They opened fire point-blank. Palmos says he jumped free and ran for cover. When he thought their clips had been spent, he leaped from his hiding place and ran for his life.

Zip and I exchange glances. We are thinking the same thing: *How much did he really see?*

Zip is not convinced they are dead. I don't want to believe it, either. All I can think is, *I have to find John. I let him go there. If he is alive, or dead or captured, I have to know. I owe him that.*

11:30 A.M.

Zip and I climb into another Mini-Moke. We look for an army unit that is supposed to be going into the Cholon area. We find it, but it's stalled. A tank had thrown a tread. It would be hours before it was moving again.

"We'll have to go it alone," Zip says. "John could be bleeding to death."

I think to myself, *I'm with the right man. Zip speaks Vietnamese. He can handle this.*

We stop a few blocks from the intersection of Tran Quoc Toan and Minh Phung. We can hear bullets whistling close by. We get out, walking in a crouch. We approach some Vietnamese sitting on the sidewalk. They are very polite. They offer us a seat and some tea.

Zip speaks to them in Vietnamese. Yes, they say, the Viet Cong are in the area.

Despite the gunfire, we are anxious to get through. Zip spots a police precinct station. He thinks they can help us.

We are ushered into the commander's office. He is wearing a flak jacket and sitting down to breakfast.

Zip loses his cool. How can this man be so nonchalant while his neighborhood is being overrun by the Viet Cong? Zip curses the commander in Vietnamese and English.

Amazingly, the commander does not get upset. He knows Zip is telling the truth.

"I've got an armored car," he says. "I'll get my jeep, and we'll go out and see what's happening."

He seems almost friendly.

We follow his jeep and armored car like a convoy. But when we come to the intersection of Tran Quoc Toan and Minh Phung, the police dare not go further. We are on our own again.

1:00 P.M.

We hire a cab, a little yellow and blue Renault, and offer the driver \$10, a king's ransom, for each block he will drive us on Minh Phung. He drives two blocks into the sound of automatic-weapons fire, then waves us out of the cab.

We start walking down the street side by side, like gunslingers on the way to the O.K. Corral. Suddenly it becomes so damn quiet.

Along the sides of buildings and in doorways, South Vietnamese paratroopers smile knowingly at us. They aren't budging. We start walking past them. The street is absolutely deserted now.

We are walking on the edge.

Zip whispers, "This is impossible."

